VOLUME 2

PASSAGES™

THE MARUS MANUSCRIPTS



GLENNALL'S BETRAYAL
DRAVEN'S DEFIANCE
FENDAR'S LEGACY

PAUL McCUSKER

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois

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—Isaac H., age 13
Colorado Springs, Colorado

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About the Author and Illustrator

to Elizabeth, my wife and friend and the mother of our darling son and daughter



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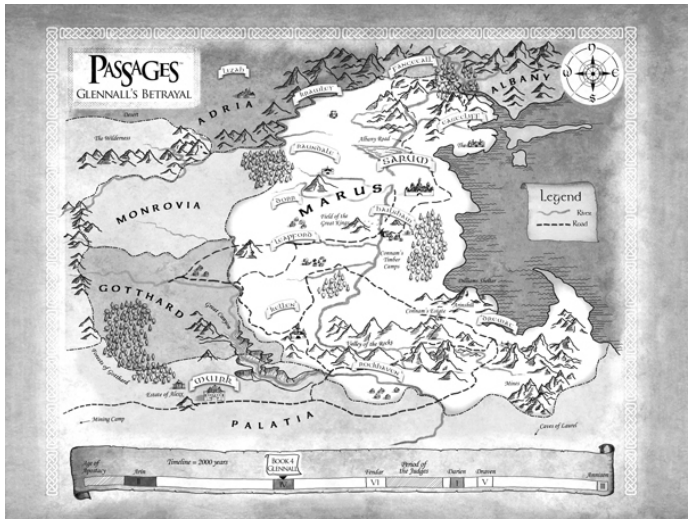
MARUS MANUSCRIPT 4



THE CHRONICLES OF THE BETRAYED

GLENNALL'S BETRAYAL

Manuscript date: March 21, 1934


PASSAGES
GLENNALL'S BETRAYAL
ADRIA
ALBANY
MONROVIA
MARUS
GOTTHARD
PALATIA
CARDO
Legend
River
Road
Timeline = 2000 years
BOOK 4
GLENNALL



James waited in the bushes until the black-and-white police car passed by. The two men inside were looking for him.

He waited, crouched like a small animal hiding from a predator. When he was sure the road was clear, he grabbed his bundle of goods—bread, cheese, and a slice of apple pie—and stood up. He adjusted the suspenders that were buttoned to his tattered wool trousers. His shirt, once white, was smudged with dirt and grass stains.

His Aunt Edna would scream if she saw the state he was in! She'd make him wash his face and comb his short brown hair, which now stuck out like a porcupine's quills. But Aunt Edna was probably screaming anyway, he figured. Why else were the police looking for him? This was the third time he'd run away from her in as many weeks.

He gave his cap a tug and sprinted across the black tar to the field on the other side. The weeds were tall, almost like wheat, and would give him easy cover if someone came. He looked ahead to the forest that would provide his way of escape. It was about 100 yards away, across the sea of weeds that moved like waves beneath the gentle breeze.

It was a beautiful spring day, perfect for escaping Aunt Edna.

He was determined not to get caught this time. He had no intention of going back to Aunt Edna and her strict ways. She was a cruel ogre as far as he was concerned, and no law or lectures could persuade him otherwise. When his parents were still alive, they never made him wear the awful clothes she made him wear. Or forced him to read all those books. Or made him do sums and fractions. Or dragged him to church every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. His parents let him do what he wanted.

"You don't understand what it's like," he had said to her during their last argument.

"But I *do*, child," she replied.

But how could she understand what it was like to have your parents lose all their money and their home in this thing called the Great Depression? How did she know what it was like to be left behind with *her* while they packed his two sisters off to nicer relatives around the country? What made her think she knew how it felt when the news came that his parents had been killed in a bus crash on their way to California? Killed while going to find work; while going to find a new home; while going to find *life*.

"You don't know! You *can't!"* James had shouted at her, slamming the door to his bedroom as a punctuation mark.

Later, when she had gone out to shop, he had collected his belongings: a torn photo of his family that he shoved into his trouser pocket and his father's ring—given to him after the accident, of course—which he tied on a string and put around his neck. After wrapping up the food in a rag in case he got hungry later, he had slipped out the back door, crept down the alley to avoid the tattletale eyes of the neighbors, and dashed away from the musty old houses.

James wasn't sure where he'd go. Maybe he could find his two sisters, and then they could all escape together. Maybe they could start a new life in California as their parents had wanted. Maybe—

A horse's whinny caught James's attention. He looked in the direction of the sound—over there near the woods—and was surprised to see not only one horse but two, and a couple of wagons, at the edge of the trees. The wagons were large and enclosed, with doors at the back and windows on the sides that were shuttered. James had seen similar wagons when his parents took him to the circus a few years before.

Hope rose in his chest. Maybe a circus had come to a town nearby. Maybe he could join it and become a world famous trapeze artist and tame lions and get fired out of cannons and travel all over the country!

As if to affirm his hope, a man dressed in an odd costume rounded one of the wagons. He wore a shirt with a rainbow of colors going up and down both sides of it, and he had knee breeches and long white stockings and black boots. He walked up to a large campfire and began to kick dirt on it,

as if to put out the flames.

Funny, James thought, *the horses, the wagons, and the campfire all look like they've been here awhile. But I didn't notice any of them when I started across the field. How did I miss them —or that mist that's moved toward me from the forest?*

It was strange to have mist like that in the middle of a sunny spring day. Yet somehow the mist didn't mute the colors of the scene. The green grass, the rainbow colors of the man's shirt, and the remains of the fire were all so vibrant, as if they'd been hand-painted on glass, like stained-glass windows in a church.

It had gotten noticeably cooler in the past few minutes, though, and James's skin went goose-pimply.

The weirdly dressed man spotted James and stood watching him with his hands on his hips. James wondered if he should run in another direction, just in case the man was the type to take him back to Aunt Edna. But the man was so unlike anyone James had seen around town that he wanted to believe he'd be friendly, if not sympathetic. The man might even give him a ride somewhere in his wagons. James started walking toward him.

"Hello," James said when he was close enough to the man to be heard.

"Hail," the man replied in a deep, resonant voice. He was a dark-skinned fellow with black hair, a thin black mustache, and a gold earring in his left ear. His eyes were bright and piercing. He looked like the picture of a gypsy James had once seen. "What brings you to us?" the man asked.

"I was walking across the field and saw you," James said, then abruptly added, "Are you a gypsy?"

"Gypsy?" the man asked.

"Or part of a circus?"

The man looked perplexed, as if James had used words that made no sense. He said, "We are traders. Are you here on an errand? Perhaps you are a message boy for someone who wishes to do business with us?"

James didn't understand what the man was saying either. "No. I'm by myself," he replied.

"Pity."

"Are you going into town?"

The man shrugged indifferently. "We are going up the

mountain, if that is what you mean."

"Mountain? What mountain?"

The man gestured toward the mist-covered woods.

James was truly confused now. No mountain stood behind those woods. Any mountains the man expected to find were in the other direction.

Suddenly a young woman came around from the back of the wagon. "We are ready, Papa," she said, then saw James. "Oh."

James was taken aback by her appearance. She had wild dark hair barely contained by a red scarf. She wore a torn peasant dress that hung loosely from her shoulders. But her eyes really caught his attention: dark and piercing, just like her father's. James thought she may have been the prettiest woman he'd ever seen.

"Who is this?" she asked the man.

"Some boy," he said and began to kick dirt at the fire again. "I want to make sure this fire is out. It wouldn't do to be blamed for burning down the mountain. Connam would have us imprisoned."

"Or one of his sons would execute us."

"All the same."

The young woman turned her attention to James. "Why do you linger, boy?" she asked. "What do you want?"

James was going to say he didn't want anything. He changed his mind when he suddenly heard car tires screeching to a halt behind him. He spun around and felt his heart jump into his throat as he saw, through the mist, a police car on the road. Two officers climbed out and pointed in his direction. One called out to him.

"Oh no," James gasped.

"What is the matter with you?" the young woman asked, craning her neck to see what he was looking at.

"The police. I can't let them catch me," James cried as he tried to think of what to do. The woods. They were his best hiding place, he thought.

The young woman looked at James. "The po-*what?"*

"The police! I ran away from my Aunt Edna, and they'll take me back." James watched as the two officers stepped into the field and made their way quickly toward him. "See?"

The young woman looked at James, then followed his gaze across the field. "I see nothing but a field in the

sunshine."

"Sunshine! What about the mist?" James exclaimed. It engulfed him now, so that the police came in and out of view. One second he could see their badges flickering in the waning light, their batons swinging from their belts against their legs. The next second, they were lost in a gray curtain. "I have to hide," he said, then ran toward the woods. Ducking behind the largest tree he could find, he waited. He hoped they hadn't seen where he went.

James heard the young woman say in a pleading voice, "Papa!"

"No," the man said, stamping out the last of the fire. "We don't have time for children who are not right in the head."

"Papa, please."

"He's not one of your stray puppies, Fantya."

"You heard him. He needs our help."

"From what? He talks about mist when it is clear and sunny. He uses words that make no sense. *Po-leese*. What does it mean?"

James ventured a peek around the tree. The officers still hadn't arrived. Maybe they were lost in the mist.

"Papa, *please?"* the young woman said softly.

The man sighed. "We can take him as far as Dremat," he offered, sounding like a man who had lost this argument many times before. "He could run away from there, if that's what he wants. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, Papa. Thank you." Fantya turned and approached James at the tree. "Boy?"

"Go away," James said in a harsh whisper as he ducked behind the tree again. "I don't want them to know where I am."

Fantya waved a hand toward the field. "There is no one there."

"They're in the mist."

"There is no mist," she said firmly. "Look."

James cautiously peered around the tree again. His mouth fell open in astonishment.

The mist was gone.

The police—and their car—had vanished.



James stared at the open field, bright golden in the sunlight. All the colors suddenly seemed much more vivid than he'd ever seen before—the blue of the sky a much deeper blue, the green of the trees a far more intense green, and the yellow of the weeds almost shining. But the police were nowhere to be found. "What happened to them?" he asked as he stepped from behind the tree to look more closely.

"You must be hungry, perhaps feverish," the young woman said. "Come into the wagon and I will find you a portion of something to eat."

"A *small* portion!" the man shouted.

"But they were there," James protested. "Their car was on the road and—" James stopped suddenly. The road, which he could see from the field only a moment ago, had also disappeared. "What happened to the road?" he cried out.

Fantya and her father watched curiously as James ran across the field. Finally he stopped and gestured wildly to the ground, shouting back to them, "It was here! I just ran across it! Where did it go?" He paced back and forth, looking down at the ground like someone who'd lost a valuable coin.

"If we leave now, he may not be able to catch up with us," the man said.

Fantya gave him a disapproving look. "Now, Papa," she said, "he is obviously in distress. Look at the poor boy."

The man grunted and began to hitch the horses to the wagons.



James was grateful to Fantya and Visyn, her father, for the food they gave him and the ride they offered to the nearest town. His confusion was compounded, though, when they told him repeatedly that the nearest town wasn't Connellsville, as he thought, but a large trading town called Dremat.

"What happened to Connellsville?" he asked as Visyn snapped the reins and the horse lurched forward.

"The same thing that happened to your mystery road," Visyn grumbled. "*Poof*. Vanished."

They set off on a rocky road leading up a mountain, for there really was a mountain. And try as he might, James couldn't figure out where the mountain had come from—any more than he could figure out how the road had disappeared.

The other wagon was driven by a man called Nosz who had a thick dark beard. Visyn's friend and business partner, Nosz was large and barrel-chested and wore clothes like Visyn's, except that he also wore a vest with bangles that dangled from the seams and jingled when he moved. Fantya sat next to Nosz on the front bench of his wagon. James couldn't help but glance back at her often, and when he did, he noticed by the way Nosz spoke and acted toward Fantya that he liked her a lot. She didn't seem interested in him, however, which made Nosz pout and complain like a spoiled child.

"Why do I waste my time with you?" James heard Nosz say to her once when they stopped to tend to the horses.

"I never asked you to waste your time," Fantya replied. "You are welcome to leave whenever you want."

Nosz growled and stormed off into the gathering sunset.

Fantya turned to James and wiggled a finger at him. "Come with me," she said. "There is someone you haven't met." She led James around to the back of the lead wagon and opened the door. "Go in," she ordered.

James climbed the small steps and went through the door into the dark interior. When his eyes had adjusted to the dimness a minute later, he saw that the inside of the wagon was decorated like a small sitting room. There was a cushioned chair and a small end table with a lacy covering and an oil lamp on top. He noticed a large, open trunk with clothes and blankets inside. A wash table sat under a shuttered window. A long, comfortable-looking sofa stretched along the front. In the corner sat a potbellied stove, its flue

pipe jutting up and disappearing through the roof. The walls were a deep brown, and the floor had a faded carpet that might have been red once.

What really caught James's attention, however, was a large cot covered with huge pillows and ornately colored blankets. A woman—an older version of Fantya—rested on the cot, smiling gently at him. James took off his cap out of respect.

"This is your stray boy?" the woman asked Fantya.

"His name is James."

The woman waved James forward. "Come into the light. Let me see you."

James moved closer to the cot. The light from a second lamp next to the cot splashed white and orange onto the woman's smooth face. She looked frail, but her eyes were sharp and clear.

"She is Deydra, my mother," Fantya said.

"A pleasure to meet you." James bowed his head politely.

The woman gazed at him from head to foot. "Your clothes are unusual," she observed. "I have never seen such long breeches. Or short boots. Or straps." She waved a bejeweled finger at his chest.

"They're my suspenders."

"Come closer," she said. "Let me see your face."

James obliged her.

Gazing at him, the woman's face suddenly lit up with surprise. "Your eyes!" she said.

"What's wrong with them?" he asked.

"They are two colors, blue and green."

"My eyes are brown," James insisted.

"Are you saying I cannot see? One is blue and the other is green," Deydra maintained. She reached behind her to the end table and picked up a gold-handled mirror. She held it up so James could see his reflection.

James looked closely. There was his slender face, the freckles that dotted his nose, and his eyes. He gasped. It was true! One eye was green and the other was blue.

"But . . . how did this happen?" he asked. "Honest, lady, I looked in the mirror at my Aunt Edna's this morning, and my eyes were still brown. Like shoe polish, my dad used to say. I would've seen if they'd changed colors."

"Sit down," Deydra said.

Fantya brought a chair forward for him. He sat down slowly, still clutching the mirror and staring at his eyes.

Deydra leaned back against her propped-up pillows. "I have heard legends of strangers with eyes like yours or strange-colored hair. I have scarcely believed them. Why should I? I have never in my life seen such things. They were legends, that's all—stories people told around campfires to scare one another."

James was speechless. He barely heard what the woman was saying. His eyes. How had they changed colors?

"You've never told me about those legends," Fantya said, disappointed.

"They are not *our* legends," Deydra said. "We Palatians don't believe in the stories of Marus. But I have heard them in our dealings with this country. Now and again someone will whisper of the Unseen One and of His messengers. People with strange-colored eyes that do His bidding. And they say it was a boy with strange-colored hair who brought the illness that destroyed the world hundreds of years ago."

"Are you a messenger for the gods?" Fantya asked James.

"The gods?"

Deydra corrected Fantya: "Not *gods*, silly girl. The *Unseen One*."

James was bewildered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Deydra studied him for a moment. "Tell me where you are from."

James obeyed. For some time, he told Deydra about his father and mother and how he'd been sent to stay with his Aunt Edna and how much he disliked her and how he kept running away to find his two sisters and take them somewhere so they could start over again as a family.

Deydra listened earnestly, then probed him with questions about his "homeland." Over the next hour, James found himself trying to explain things like cars and policemen and electricity and planes. He didn't notice when Fantya slipped out of the wagon, and he barely noticed the jolt and rocking of the wagon as they continued their journey up the mountain.

"You are either a clever liar, a very gifted storyteller, or

from another world," Deydra said when James had run out of things to say. "Which is it?"

"I'm not lying," James said.

"Then you have been telling me stories?"

"No," he said firmly. "I'm not making it up."

"Then . . ." she hesitated, giving James enough time to draw his own conclusion.

James suddenly laughed. "I'm not from another world," he said. "I *can't* be."

"What you have described sounds nothing like *this* world, I can assure you."

James couldn't decide what to do. The woman didn't seem insane. But what was he supposed to think when she talked about other worlds?

"If I'm from another world, then where am I now?" he asked.

"At the moment, you are in the land of Marus."

"Never heard of it."

"But you're here."

"I don't believe it."

Deydra quickly reached over and pinched James's arm. He jerked backward and cried out, "Hey, what's the big idea? What was that for?"

"To make sure you aren't dreaming."

A small red welt formed where she had pinched him. "This is nuts," he said as he rubbed his arm. "How could I go to another world? I'm not Flash Gordon. I didn't get in one of those rocket ships to the moon. I was running across the field."

"Fantya told me you saw a mist that no one else saw."

"Yeah, so?"

"Perhaps it was an enchanted mist. A mist that carried you to this land."

"I don't believe it," James said adamantly, his jaw set.

"Then go away," she responded angrily, waving a hand as if to dismiss him. "If you do not believe, why should I? What is to stop me from deciding that you are out of your mind or delirious with a fever that has changed the color of your eyes? By rights, I should throw you from this wagon and let you make your own way. Or better still, I could turn you in to the authorities at Dremat. They have places for people who have gone insane."

“But I’m not insane!”

“Then stop arguing with me and listen,” she said, then softened her tone. “You are here. This much we can’t deny. By your own confession, you do not know anything about this land. Sit and keep your mouth closed and I will tell you the way of things.”

James noticed then that he’d wrung his cap like a wet dishrag.

“Unlike my own country of Palatia, Marus is not ruled by a king but is a collection of fiefdoms,” the woman began. “Some families who emerged from the ashes of the previous world, the world that existed before the Great Catastrophe, have secured and maintained their positions of power. Some have become slaves. Some even disappeared completely. The powerful families rule what can be ruled of Marus. They negotiate the peace with one another and conduct business with the neighboring countries. This is why we travel from Palatia to the southern part of Marus. We trade with the family that owns the land, this mountain, the forests, and the mines of the south: the family of Connam.”

The woman talked on and on. And James, feeling as if he were listening to Aunt Edna again, struggled hard to concentrate. But his mind kept returning to one thought: *How am I going to get out of here?*

Eventually he asked permission to let some air into the musty old wagon. He opened the shutter on one of the windows, and the cool smell of pine blew in. He breathed deeply.

Standing at the window, James looked at Deydra and wondered how someone so sweet could be so completely mad. To think that he’d somehow stumbled from one world to another was . . . well . . . more than he was willing to believe. He didn’t care what she said about Marus or who was in charge or legends about Unseen Ones or whatever else she made up.

He wondered what would happen if he suddenly made a break for the door and ran off. Would they come after him? Probably not. What was he to them? Just a runaway boy. That’s all he was to anyone.

James checked the path to the door. Nothing stood in his way. The frail woman couldn’t grab for him. His muscles tensed throughout his body. He could do it. He *should* do it.

What was the use of staying here with these people?

He glanced out the window. If they were on a mountain, it would be foolish to leap out the door and roll off a cliff. He saw the dirt road and thick trees off to the side. His eyes wandered through the branches to the terrain beyond. It was dark now and hard to see, making him realize they had talked away the day, but he could still make out the upward slope. Suddenly, the wagon passed a clearing in the trees, and James saw a valley in the distance below. He thought he could make out the flickering lights of a town. Then he became aware of a great light that shone pale across the entire scene. His eyes turned up to the night sky, and instantly he felt as if someone had struck him in the chest with a sledgehammer.

"No!" he whispered.

"What's wrong, boy?" Deydra asked.

James couldn't speak. Even if he could've, he wouldn't have known the words to say. But in that moment, he realized the woman wasn't out of her mind after all. Neither was he, for his own eyes couldn't deny what he was seeing at that very moment.

There, high above him, was a sky with *two moons*. One was large and white, and the other was about half the size and slightly more orange.



James lay buried in a makeshift bundle of blankets and furs under the dazzling night sky. A roaring campfire crackled nearby. Only an hour before, the caravan had sat down to a meal of rabbit and potatoes. After that, Visyn had gone into the wagon to sleep, and Fantya had decided to take a late-night walk. James wasn't sure what had become of Nosz. He'd been silent and grumpy since they'd set up camp.

James tried to sleep, but his head kept spinning with all that had happened that day. The cool mountain air, the smell of the pine needles, the sounds of the night birds, and the glow of those two moons only made him more awake.

They were camped on Arinshill, the mountain nearest Dremat. Deydra had explained that the mountain was named after Arin, a prophet from the Unseen One who had heralded the Great Catastrophe. Only he and his family had survived the tragedy, and they were then led to this place by the Unseen One. There the world began anew.

James puzzled over the legends of the Unseen One. It seemed to him that they were very similar to the stories in his world about God. Were they one and the same? And what did the stories have to do with him, his different-colored eyes, and his presence in this strange place?

James again considered running away, but he knew now that he was a total stranger, a foreigner to everything in this world, and had nowhere to go. Staying close to Deydra, Fantya, and Visyn was the smartest thing to do for the time being. He hoped that going into Dremat tomorrow would help him figure out how to get back to his world.

Nearby, he now heard the deep voice of Nosz. Then Fantya spoke back to him. She sounded angry. James waited and listened. Then he heard the distinct sound of a slap, open

hand on skin. Had Fantya slapped Nosz across the face?

Fantya suddenly laughed—a low, humorless laugh. It faded away.

Nosz's voice echoed through the woods like an erupting volcano. "I've had enough of this!" he shouted. "Do you hear me? Enough!"

James froze as he heard the heavy thuds of Nosz's approaching footsteps. He came nearer and nearer, then stopped next to James. James cautiously looked up. Nosz peered down at him, his nostrils flared, sweat beaded on his forehead, his mouth curled into a sneer.

"What are you looking at, boy?" Nosz demanded.

James stammered, "Nothing, sir."

Nosz snorted and strode off.

James lay still, wishing for sleep, but also wishing someone would sit down and explain to him what all these things meant. He felt an ache in his heart, the same ache he'd felt when he was told his parents were dead. It was an ache of loneliness, an emptiness in the middle of his chest.

To distract himself from the feeling, he went back to the muddle of questions cycling around in his brain. How did his eyes change colors? How did he get into this strange country? How could he get back home, *if* he could get back at all?

Eventually, the crackling of the campfire and the warmth of the bundle helped James fall into a deep sleep. He dreamed of his parents and his two sisters. It was a bright, sunny day, and they had gone to a beach to play catch. They laughed together, their faces lit up with joy. Somewhere, he heard waves crashing against rocks and seagulls crying overhead. To his annoyance, one seagull cried out again and again in a mournful way.

James looked up at the bird, but instead he saw a night sky with two bright moons and tree limbs reaching up to them. Puzzled, he turned to his father, but his father was gone. So were his mother and two sisters. Even the beach had vanished. He now stood alone in a forest.

"Am I back in Marus?" he asked.

Then he heard that mournful cry again. Was it an animal, or was it someone calling out? Either way, it sounded like a cry for help.

He went to investigate. Walking along an overgrown path, he was aware that his legs ached, as if he'd been

walking a long time. The path was on an incline, going up and up.

Looking around, he noticed for the first time that the sides of the path were strewn with old baskets and boxes, with small black rocks spilling out from their openings. James picked up one of the rocks. It looked and felt like coal.

I must be near a mine, he thought. He remembered that Deydra had mentioned mining as one of the industries here.

Suddenly the cry echoed through the woods again, somewhere up ahead. This time James could tell it was a young man's cry. James stopped and listened.

"Heeeeeeeellllllpppp!"

He dashed up the path. It angled around to the right and into a clearing littered with mining equipment. Besides the baskets and boxes, James also saw pickaxes, shovels, and upended wheelbarrows. Then, at the edge of the area, he saw a weather-beaten sign, hanging lopsided from a post, that said "Arinshill Mine."

James immediately assumed that the cry for help came from somewhere inside the mine on the other side of the clearing. *Someone is trapped*, he thought. And he would have rushed forward if it hadn't been for a different, unexpected sound: an outburst of laughter. One man laughed alone, and then several joined in loudly and heartily.

Creeping from tree to tree, behind a wheelbarrow and then behind a large rock, James got a clearer view of what was happening. Near the entrance to the mine, several large and burly men, most with long hair and thick beards, were standing with torches held high. They wore short tunics, belted at the waist. Their legs were covered with breeches and knee-high boots. Through their legs, James could see that they circled a lumpy sack on the ground. Something inside the sack moved and wiggled.

"Heeeeeellllllpppp!" came a voice from the sack.

One of the men gave the sack a sharp kick. "Shut up," he growled.

"You're going to get into big trouble for this," the voice in the sack said, sounding pained from the kick.

"Not as much trouble as you're in now," another man replied. Some of the men chuckled.

"I'll tell Father!"

"You won't be telling anybody anything," someone said

and kicked him again.

"Let's take him into the cave," another man said.

"Wait," yet another barked, then knelt down and reached into the sack. His arm jerked around as whoever was inside twisted and resisted. "Stop it," the man demanded and punched the side of the sack.

"Sesta, what are you doing?" a younger member of the group asked.

"We don't want the ring to disappear with him, do we?" Sesta replied. "I'm going to take it off his finger."

The largest of the men, and probably the oldest since his hair was sprinkled with gray, put a hand on Sesta's shoulder. "Why?" he asked.

"Father gave it to him! It's valuable!"

"All the more reason why you should leave it," the large man said. "What will you do, wear it so that Father will see? He'll ask how you got it, and then we *will* be in trouble."

"I'll tell Father it was all we could find of him after he ran away."

"That makes no sense," the large man said firmly. "Why would he run away without the ring?"

Sesta stood up and complained, "You don't want me to have the ring, do you? You always were on *his* side. Even though he'll rob you of your rightful place as Father's heir, you'll stick up for him."

"I agree with Rastall," one of the others said.

Sesta then came up with another idea. "I know! We'll tell Father that he was killed by a wild animal and show the ring as proof!"

"This is a dirty business," Rastall said. "It will come back to haunt us one day."

"Not if we followed *my* plan."

Rastall stiffened his back, rising to his full height, a full head and shoulders over the others. "No! Imprisoning him in this cave is one thing, but killing him is another. I forbid it." He then added in a low, threatening tone, "Unless someone wants to challenge me."

The rest of the men shuffled their feet uneasily.

Sesta hooked a hand around the top of the sack. "Into the cave," he commanded.

Four of the men joined Sesta in picking up the sack, and then they all disappeared into the darkness. After a short

while, they returned without the sack, most of their torches extinguished, and went their way silently into the dark forest.

James felt sick. The men must have thrown the man in the sack into a mine shaft. The one called Rastall wouldn't let them kill him, but what was the difference if they left him to die anyway?

James slipped out from behind the rock and, after making sure none of the men were on their way back, headed toward the cave. But as he approached the entrance, his feet seemed to sink in the dirt. Alarmed, he looked down at his shoes. They were covered with mud—up to his ankles now. He pulled with all his might, but he couldn't get free. Worse, he sank even farther. The mud was like quicksand. The more he struggled, the farther he descended into the brown goo. It was up to his knees, then his waist.

He gasped, the panic working through every pore of his body. He desperately looked for something to grab. The various mining tools were just out of reach. He called out for help, hoping now that the men *would* come back. Instead, a voice—the voice from the sack—echoed his call. "Help!" the two of them shouted.

The mud was now up to James's chest. Then his neck. His arms were useless. He closed his mouth tight as the wet dirt pressed on his lips. Snorting like a horse, he tried to keep the mud out of his nostrils. It was only a short matter of time before he would have to breathe in all the damp and dirt and death.

Then there were hands on him, pushing at him.

"Wake up, James," a soft voice said.

With a harsh, rattling intake of air, James rolled over. Fantya gazed down at him with a worried expression on her face.

"You were thrashing around under your covers," she said. "Are you all right?"

James nodded, still breathing as if he'd never taken a breath before. The sky was light gray from the rising sun. Fantya looked exactly as she had the night before: the same wide-eyed expression, the same clothes. She didn't look as if she hadn't been to sleep at all. James sat up and tried to shake the memory of the dream away.

"Bad dream?" she asked.

"Awful," he replied. "I saw a group of men put someone

in an old mine, and when I went to help, I got stuck in quicksand."

Fantya patted his arm soothingly and assured him, "It was only a dream."

"But it seemed so real."

"There are a lot of mines around here, but I don't think you have to worry about quicksand." Fantya gave James's arm a gentle tug. "Come on. You have to get up now. We're ready to go to Dremat. We'll give you some breakfast on the way."

James then noticed that the horses were hitched up to the wagons. Once again, Visyn was busying himself by kicking dirt on a campfire.

Fantya said, "We're eager to get on with our business. And we will as soon as Nosz returns."

"Returns from where?"

She shrugged. "He said he had some business to take care of. Ah, here he comes now."

Nosz emerged from a path in the woods. "This isn't normal for us, but we're willing to oblige a regular customer," he was saying.

Then a man stepped out from behind Nosz. "You're wise," the man replied. "The biggest businesses are built on the backs of little favors."

The man was large and burly, with long hair and a thick beard. He wore a short tunic with a belt around the waist. Underneath were dark breeches and black, knee-length boots. James had seen the man before—in his dream.

"Sesta!" James gasped.

Nosz looked up, annoyed at the impertinence of the boy. "How dare you call the master by his first name!" he demanded.

Sesta looked at James quizzically and asked, "Do I know you, boy?"

"No, sir," James said, unsure of what to say. "I mean, I . . . I'm sorry."

"Mind your manners," Nosz growled. He and Sesta walked off toward Nosz's wagon.

"I thought you said you'd never been here before," Visyn said, approaching James from the dying embers of the campfire.

"I haven't."

"Then how do you know Sesta?" he asked.

“I don’t know him. Who is he?”

“One of the many sons of Connam.”

“Connam?” James asked, then remembered even while Visyn answered. Connam was the wealthiest and most powerful man in the southern part of Marus.

Visyn grunted and concluded, “He’s very important to our trade. I hope you didn’t offend him.” Then he walked off.

“You still haven’t answered how you know him,” Fantya said.

James got to his feet. “He was one of the men in my dream. He wanted to kill whoever they’d kidnapped.”

“But you’ve never seen him before. How is it that you dreamed about him?”

“Good question,” James said.

Fantya narrowed her eyes, as if she were working out a difficult math problem. “But if *he’s* real, do you think maybe your dream was real?” she asked.

James shivered. “That’s not possible. Dreams aren’t real.”

“And yet, there stands the man from your dream.” She gestured toward Nosz and Sesta. They stood next to Nosz’s wagon. The two men shook hands, and Sesta disappeared into the forest. “What else do you remember from your dream?”

James recounted everything. Afterward, Fantya said, “You saw a sign that said ‘Arinshill Mine’?”

“Yes.”

“There is an Arinshill Mine not far from here. I have seen signs for it when I have walked alone in the woods.”

Not always alone, James thought as he remembered hearing her shout angrily at Nosz—and the sound of the slap.

“Let’s go,” Fantya eagerly said.

“Go?”

Without waiting for him, she headed briskly for the path into the forest. “To the mine,” she said over her shoulder.

James raced after her. “But it was only a dream,” he reminded her.

She went on anyway.

“Where are you going?” Visyn shouted at them.

“We’ll be back!” Fantya called without slowing down.

Visyn let loose a stream of words that James assumed was the Palatian version of swearing.



The sign said “Arinshill Mine” and was broken and tilted exactly as James had seen it in his dream. “This is nuts,” James whispered.

He and Fantya walked into the clearing. Everything in the dream was there: the mining equipment, the baskets and boxes, the pickaxes and shovels and upended wheelbarrows, all cluttered with bits of coal and soot. And on the opposite side of the clearing was the mouth of the cave.

“Is this what you dreamed?” she asked him.

He wanted to lie. He wanted to say it was nothing like his dream so they could turn around and go back. His skin started to go goose-pimply. This wasn’t normal, to have dreams become real.

“Well?” she prodded him.

“Yes, it is,” he finally admitted.

Fantya went to the cave and jumped up and down on the dry dirt. “No quicksand.”

James was slightly relieved. “That means my dream wasn’t completely right. Maybe there isn’t anyone in the cave either.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” Fantya cupped her hands around the sides of her mouth and shouted, “Hello! Is anyone in there?”

“Heeeeellllppp!” came a voice from the darkness.

James felt his skin crawl. It was the same voice he’d heard in his dream.

Fantya ventured into the cave but stopped at the edge of the shadows. Careful to avoid the area where he’d sunk in the mud in his dream, James also entered the cave.

“We won’t get very far without a torch,” James said.

Fantya looked around the ground. “The men in your

dream went in."

"They had torches."

"Maybe they left one behind."

"Heeeeelllppp!" came the voice again.

"We're coming!" Fantya shouted impatiently as she picked up an old oil lamp. It was fractured and dry. She dropped it.

James went to the far side of the cave opening. He imagined one of the men casually tossing his extinguished torch to one side as they came out. Sure enough, he saw a long, slender stick of wood with a ball of cloth and tar on its end.

"Here," James called out, picking up the torch.

Fantya smiled. "Well done." She tucked her hand into a pocket and produced a small book of matches. In an instant, the match was lit and so was the torch. Made braver by the light, the two of them crept farther into the cave.

Similar to the clearing outside, the inside of the cave was a mess of old mining materials. They stepped over and around more wheelbarrows and pickaxes, past a wooden shack, and over holes in the ground. Timber that had once braced the walls and ceiling now lay rotting across the floor.

"Heeeeellllppp!" the voice called.

Fantya called back, "Keep shouting so we'll know if we're getting close."

"What do you want me to shout?" the voice asked.

"Anything!" Fantya replied, exasperated.

The voice began to count loudly. "One, two, three, four . . ."

James guessed that the voice belonged to a boy not much older than himself and likely a few years younger than Fantya—possibly 15 or 16.

The voice had reached the number 28 when James and Fantya found the edge of the mine shaft he'd been thrown into. They held the torch over the side and peered down. The shaft itself was unfinished, going down only about 30 feet below them. If there'd once been a ladder on the side of the unfinished shaft, it was long gone. A teenage boy sat at the bottom.

"Hello," he said cordially, blinking up at them.

"Hi," James responded with a slight wave.

"How are we going to get him out?" Fantya asked.

"I don't know."

"Rope?" the boy called up to them. "The miners used hoists to haul out the buckets of coal. Look for a hoist and you'll find the rope attached."

James and Fantya shrugged at each other and obeyed. Within minutes, they'd found a hoist with a rope long enough to drop down to the boy.

"You grab the rope and we'll pull you up," James told him.

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Why not?"

"My hands are tied. So are my feet."

Fantya looked at James skeptically and announced, "I'm not pulling you both up."

"We'll have to pull ourselves up," James replied. He grabbed the end of the rope and tied it to the largest of the nearby support beams. He then went to the edge of the shaft, dropped the rope into the hole, and began to climb down.

"Be careful," Fantya said.

James held the rope with both hands and braced his feet against the side of the shaft, just like the photos of mountain climbers he'd once seen. But James was no mountain climber, and he found his feet slipping away, which slammed his whole body against the wall. This happened several times as he descended the shaft. By the time he reached the bottom, he was banged up and shaken.

The teenager now sat helplessly against the wall. He was surprisingly gangly, with long arms and legs, a thin neck, and a face James could hardly make out in the darkness. He had a mop on his head that looked more like tumbleweed than hair.

"I knew you would come," the young man said with a smile.

James was perplexed. "What?" he asked.

"I saw you in my dream last night."

"You saw *me?"*

"You hid behind a big rock. You saw what they did to me. You were going to come and help me, but . . ."

"But what?"

"But you couldn't. I don't know why."

"I couldn't help you because I *woke up*," James said, his skin starting to crawl again. "I wasn't really behind the rock. I

only *dreamed* I was behind the rock."

"Then why did I see you in my dream? How did I know you saw what happened?"

"I didn't *see* what happened. I only *dreamed* I saw it."

The young man's mouth fell open. "That means that you dreamed my experience. And I dreamed your dream."

"Are you going to chat in that hole all day or are you coming back up?" Fantya asked.

"Can you stand up?" James asked the boy.

"They bound me around the ankles. Unfortunately, I've lost all the feeling in my feet and hands."

"Roll over a little while I try to untie your hands," James said. The teenager turned to his side. James pondered the leather straps on his wrists, then began to pick at them. "They sure didn't want to take any chances with you," he said between grunts.

"They're my brothers," the boy said sadly. "I don't know what got into them."

"Run-of-the-mill hatred is what I figure," James said, then groaned. The knots tore at his fingers as he tore at the knots.

"My name is Glennall," the teen said.

"Nice to meet you. I'm James."

Fantya shouted, "This torch isn't going to last much longer."

"I'm doing the best I can," James called back. It took several minutes, but he finally undid the straps.

"Much better," Glennall said. He waved his hands in the air. "But they're dead for the time being. I don't think I'll be able to grab the rope to climb out."

"Rub them," James suggested.

Glennall tried. The effect was like rubbing two packs of sausages together.

"Let me," James offered, clasping Glennall's hands in his own.

Something happened then that startled him. In a flash, James saw a picture in his mind. He stood in the front hall of a mansion. Glennall stood next to him. They were both scrubbed clean, their hair combed, and they were dressed in silver coats and breeches, with white lace shirts. A heavyset man with a round, jowly face and silver hair pulled back in a ponytail smiled at them. James had the immediate impression

they were being praised for something by the heavyset man. He felt comfortable and satisfied, as if his life was the best it had ever been. Then the picture disappeared.

Glennall had let go of James's hands and was staring at him with an expression of shock.

"What was *that?"* James asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Glennall replied. "I wonder who that man was?"

"I've never seen him before," James said, then stopped cold. He suddenly realized what Glennall had just said. "What man?" he asked warily.

"The man in the dream."

"What dream?"

"The dream we just had. You and I were standing in the front hall of some sort of palace. A rather rotund man was complimenting us for something."

James felt weak in the knees. "But that means we had the exact same dream."

"Only in a manner of speaking," remarked Glennall. "I think we saw *two halves* of the same dream. My dream was from *my* point of view. I assume your dream was from *your* point of view. The same as the dreams we both had last night."

"But that's not possible."

"Possible or not, it happened."

Fantya called down, "We're going to lose our light if you don't make haste!"

"We'll figure it out when I get your feet untied," James said as he attacked the straps on Glennall's feet. They were just as difficult to untie as the straps on his wrists had been. But a few minutes later, Glennall was free from his bonds.

Glennall tried to flex his muscles. "My hands and feet are useless," he said. "How am I going to get up?"

"We'll have to tie the rope around your chest. Then Fantya and I will pull you up."

James looped the rope around Glennall's torso. After making sure it was tied securely, he shimmied up the rope to the top. This was a painful task, since his fingers were raw from untying the leather straps, and his legs were tired from so much unusual exertion. He was red-faced and exhausted by the time he saw Fantya again.

She hadn't exaggerated. The torch was beginning to lose

its flame. “I don’t want to be trapped in here in the dark,” she said. She looked worried.

“All right. Let’s hurry and pull him up,” James responded.

Fantya hooked the torch into a circle of iron that had been mounted on the side of the cave to hold an oil lamp. She came back to James, and together they grabbed the rope and began to pull. Glennall wasn’t heavy, but his clothes and limbs caught against the side of the mine shaft. He “oofed” and “ouched” the entire way up.

“I hope his father is rich and will give us a very large reward,” Fantya puffed.

“If he’s who I think he is,” James said, “his father is the richest man around.”

The torch flickered as if to threaten them. James and Fantya quickly lifted Glennall out of the mine shaft. “My feet and hands are pins and needles,” Glennall complained. As a result, James and Fantya had to carry him through the tunnel.

The torch gave up its light just as the mouth of the cave came into view.

“By the grace of the Unseen One,” Glennall whispered.

“Are you a believer in the Unseen One?” Fantya asked.

“Of course,” Glennall replied, as if *not* believing was an absurd thought.

Fantya seemed mystified. “I’ve never met anyone who believed.”

They reached the clearing and winced at the sunlight.

“Thank you, Fantya,” a deep voice boomed. “You’ve saved me from the trouble.”



James knew who it was even before he shielded his eyes to see more clearly. Nosz stood before them with two broad-shouldered men of olive complexion and the look of street thugs. One had a puckered scar disfiguring his cheek.

"Saved you from *what* trouble, Nosz?" Fantya asked.

"The trouble of getting the boy out of the mine shaft myself."

"What do you want with him?" she demanded.

"Strictly business, my dear."

"What kind of business? I am returning to my father," said Glennall as resolutely as he could manage. His face was screwed up against the sunlight. He looked pale and haggard. Red spots of acne dotted his forehead and nose. One of his eyes was black, probably from being kicked by his brothers. "I'm the son of Connam, and you will stand aside!"

Nosz was undaunted. "You're coming with me," he insisted. "It's been arranged with your brothers."

"My brothers will have no say over me once I've spoken with my father."

"Which is why you'll never speak to your father again. You're coming with me to Palatia."

"Palatia! I have no business in Palatia."

"You will once I've *sold* you." Nosz said it in such a casual way that James almost didn't catch it.

Fantya did, and she stepped forward angrily. "We don't deal in slaves," she said through gritted teeth. "My father will never allow it."

"Your father and I have severed our partnership, Fantya," said Nosz. "He will go his way, and I will go mine. *I warned you.*"

"We'll be the better for it."

“Perhaps you will. But in the meantime, I have negotiated a lucrative business deal with the sons of Connam. In no time at all, I will be a very wealthy man, while you and your family continue as second-rate traders. I hope you enjoy your life.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Glennall demanded.

“You’re part of the arrangement,” Nosz explained. “I’m doing your brothers a favor by getting rid of you for them.” Nosz signaled the two thugs. “Take him.”

The two goons made for Glennall. He tried to run, but his legs were in no condition to carry him very far. The men grabbed him easily.

James put up a fight until one of the thugs backhanded him with a fist. Stunned, he fell to the ground. He was quickly seized and bound.

Fantya also fought, going straight at Nosz with her fingernails extended like a lioness’s claws.

Nosz caught hold of her wrist. “Be careful, girl, or I’ll take you with us,” he threatened.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He smiled cruelly, twisting her wrist until she squirmed from the pain. “Go back to your father,” he commanded. “And if you know what’s good for you, you won’t say a word about this to anyone. Speak of it, and you’ll be stirring up trouble for yourself with the sons of Connam. Believe me, you’ll hurt no one but your family.”

“I hate you.”

Grabbing her face, he kissed her roughly on the lips. Then he pushed her away.

She stumbled back a few steps, wiped her mouth, and spat, “You’re a pig.”

Nosz glared at her. His face went red, and he raised his fists as if he might explode into great violence. Instead, he jerked his head at his two thugs. They pulled James and Glennall to their feet.

Fantya suddenly realized what they were doing. “Why are you taking James?” she asked.

“Because there’s nothing to stop *him* from trying to reach Connam with news about his missing son.”

“You have no right!” Fantya insisted. “He’s a stranger here. He has nothing to do with any of us!”

"He does now."

"What if I don't want to come with you?" James said. "What if I shout long and hard that I've been kidnapped?"

"Then I'll kill you here and now," Nosz answered, and James knew he meant it. "You have no choice, boy. Your life is forfeit to me now."

"But . . . you can't sell *me* as a slave."

Again the cruel smile spread across Nosz's face.



James and Glennall sat on the floor in the back of Nosz's wagon, feeling every jerk and bump as the wheels hit rocks or dipped into ruts in the road. Unlike Deydra's wagon, which seemed like a home on wheels, this wagon was little better than a barn with a bed. A cot stretched along one wall, and an unlit oil lamp swung from a hook above. The rest of the space was taken up with crates of goods, straw and dirt on the floor, a trunk of clothes, and a rusty potbellied stove.

Chained to a ring in the wall, James and Glennall sat in near darkness. What little light there was came through the gaps between the slats of wood. The shutters on the two small windows were closed and clamped down.

"He won't get away with this, you know," Glennall said.

"He's doing pretty well so far," James replied.

They had left the mountain an hour or two before, circled around the bustling city of Dremat, and continued southwest on the main road to Palatia. Nosz and his two henchmen were in the front, driving the horse. Apart from the occasional noise of other passing horses, wagons, and people hailing from the side of the road, nothing else could be heard.

After a while, Glennall said, "I suppose you're wondering how I got in this mess."

"The question crossed my mind," James acknowledged.

"My brothers are jealous of me."

James glanced at the red acne spots on Glennall's face, his patch of wild hair, and his gangly frame. He compared Glennall's looks to the strong, rugged, handsome men at the cave. "They're jealous of you?" he asked skeptically.

“It’s not so hard to believe,” Glennall said defensively. “I’m my father’s favorite.”

James looked at him doubtfully.

“You don’t believe me.”

James shrugged.

“You don’t seem to understand. Rastall, Sesta, Turnan, Drouse, Naud, and Yon are my father’s sons by Agula, his first wife. He adopted Cannap, Fortawince, Selsond, and Pa’an.”

The names meant nothing to James.

Glennall continued, a hint of pride in his voice. “But my younger brother, Transe, and I are the sons of the woman he loved the most: Elega.”

“So?”

“So my father has a special affection for me and Transe. Me, particularly, because I am the oldest son of Elega.”

“Where’s your mother now?”

“She died giving birth to Transe.”

“Oh. That’s too bad.”

Glennall looked thoughtful. “I think that’s another reason my father is so protective with me and Transe.”

James rattled their chains. “It looks like his protection hasn’t helped much.”

“The point is, my father has always treated me differently. More so after the visions began.”

“Visions?”

“They started when I came down with a fever back when I was a small boy. I have these terrible headaches, blinding in their pain, that leave me weak and delirious.”

“That’s tough.”

“I suppose so,” said Glennall indifferently. “Because of them, my father has made me stay at home.”

“So you didn’t get out much.”

“No, but I was allowed to read my father’s entire library and every other book I could get my hands on. I’m surprisingly intelligent for my age.” Glennall smiled.

James prodded him on. “You were telling me about your visions.”

“Once,” he began again, “I rose from my sickbed and announced that one of our mines had collapsed and many men had died. My family assured me that no mine had collapsed—I’d only had a nightmare. I said that one would. Unfortunately, I didn’t know which mine or when it would

happen. My father and brothers said they couldn't close down the mines while we waited around for my disaster to happen, so they did nothing. Two days later, a mine collapsed and killed 54 men."

"It might've been a coincidence."

Glennall continued, "And there was another time when I saw a vision in which men at one of our timber camps were hurt by a falling tree. Once again, I didn't know where it would happen or when. So no one heeded me. Sadly, a tree fell, breaking the bones of several men who couldn't get out of the way in time. One died."

"But why would your visions make your brothers jealous?" James asked.

"Those didn't. But the ones I had later did."

"Why?"

"Because the visions were about them."

James looked at Glennall curiously.

Glennall explained, "I had one in which my brothers were starving. They gathered around me, begging for food. I gave them as much as they needed and saved their lives."

"You had them eating out of the palm of your hand."

"That's right."

"And you told them about the vision."

"Why wouldn't I?"

James rolled his eyes. "You may be intelligent for your age, but you're not very smart."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't it occur to you that telling them was a stupid idea?"

"Why? It was what happened in my vision."

"Because they'd resent you," James growled. "It might even make them want to hurt you."

"Oh, I see what you mean," Glennall said as if the thought hadn't occurred to him before. "I assumed they would be happy for me to save their lives."

"Maybe they will be if it ever actually happens. But not now. They're your *older* brothers. Older brothers don't like to be in debt to their younger brothers."

"Why not?"

James tried to think of a good answer but couldn't. "I don't know. That's just how it is. I've got two younger sisters, and one of them is a real goody-two-shoes. She was always

getting me in trouble."

"How?"

"Telling on me when I did something wrong."

Glennall suddenly frowned. "Oh."

"Did you tell on your brothers?"

"Only because my father asked me to."

"Oh, brother," James said with a sigh.

"Last year he said I could get out of the house to be his personal messenger. He sent me to the various work sites to give messages to my brothers. He also said to report to him if they weren't doing their work properly."

"And you did."

"Of course I did. I couldn't lie to my father."

James shook his head disparagingly. "And you wonder why they threw you in the cave?"

"It's not my fault," Glennall complained. "I was only doing what my father asked. My brothers had all gone off together to our home near Dremat to discuss their various responsibilities around my father's lands. At least, that's what they were *supposed* to be doing. My father was too ill to attend, so he sent me to represent him."

"He asked *you* to speak for him?"

"Yes. He gave me his ceremonial gown and his ring and said to advise them."

"In other words, he made you the Big Cheese over your brothers," said James. "That's a recipe for disaster. So what happened?"

"When I went to find them, they weren't there. A servant said they'd gone to Dremat. I couldn't think why, so I searched for them and found them feasting in the city."

"You mean they were off having fun when they should have been working?"

"Yes."

"So you confronted them."

"I told them Father would be *very* displeased if he knew they had gone to Dremat when they were supposed to be discussing family business."

James held up his hand. "Don't tell me, let me guess: That's when they hauled you up to the mine."

"Yes."

"What a surprise."

"They put me in a sack and carried me up to the cave.

They hit me and kicked me and . . . and some of them even spoke of . . . of . . . killing me." He lowered his head into his folded arms. James thought he'd begun to cry.

James waited.

"Rastall was the only one to defend me," Glennall eventually said. "He told them not to kill me for fear that it might come back as a curse upon them. He said to sell me as a slave instead."

"What a pal."

Glennall was quiet for a moment, then added, "Dilliam said it would be like this."

"Who's Dilliam?"

"A wise man who lives in a shelter near our home. Some call him a priest. He said that the hand of the Unseen One was upon me. My father was worried about that. He said those who are chosen by the Unseen One get nothing but trouble. But Dilliam said it wasn't my father's choice, though he admitted I would be ridiculed and abused."

"I don't know anything about the Unseen One. But I know you *will* be ridiculed and abused if you act like a turnip head."

"Turnip head!" Glennall was indignant.

"Sure," James replied. "Marching around like a little king, telling on your brothers, having visions about being better than they are . . . What do you expect?"

"It's not my fault and it's not fair," Glennall sniffed. "I only hope the Unseen One will make things right and grant me the means for revenge. One day I'll pay them back."

"Fat chance," James said.

"I believe He will." He looked at James hopefully. "Especially now that you're here."

"What do you mean?"

"The Unseen One is at work in you somehow."

"What are you talking about?" James said, annoyed.

"You have eyes of different colors—the mark of the Unseen One."

"I don't believe all that stuff."

"You don't believe?" Glennall asked. "But your eyes are different colors." He said it as if that fact meant James had to be a believer.

"That's some kind of accident. A doctor could explain it."

“What about your dreams and what happened to us in the mine shaft?”

“They were dreams, that’s all,” James said. “A coincidence. It’s not like every dream I have comes true. When I dreamed about you, I also dreamed I was on a beach with my family. Did that happen? No. And after I dreamed about you, I thought I was being swallowed up in quicksand. Did that happen? No.”

“Not all dreams are dreams that come true. But there are dreams *within* dreams—”

“Listen to me,” James said as he turned to face him angrily. “I don’t know anything about your Unseen One. And I can’t explain how these crazy dreams happened. But I don’t believe in all this mumbo jumbo about visions.”

“But you *have* to believe.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” snapped James. “Look, I don’t even belong here!”

“Then where do you belong?”

The question stopped James. He didn’t know where he belonged anymore. Back with Aunt Edna? In some other part of the country with his two sisters? He felt all alone.

The wagon suddenly stopped as Nosz shouted, “Whoa!”

After a few minutes, the door to the back of the wagon was yanked open. Light poured in, causing the boys to blink. The henchman with the scar on his cheek climbed in. He kicked at them to get out of the way while he unlocked their chains.

“Get out,” he grunted. “And don’t do anything you’ll regret.”



James and Glennall climbed out of the wagon. Nosz had stopped on the side of the road. A wide, treeless field spread out beside them. James was startled again by the colors: the richness of the green grass, the depth of blue in the sky, even the darkness of the brown coats on several saddled horses nearby. He wondered if everything seemed brighter because he'd been in the dark wagon—or if this was something peculiar about Marus. He suspected it was Marus.

Next to the horses sat several men wearing uniforms unlike any James had ever seen. Their coats were gray with gold buttons and extended to their midcalves. Underneath they wore crisp white shirts, wool vests, and gray breeches to match the coats. Their boots were a shiny black. The men looked as if they'd been riding and had stopped to rest.

Nosz approached the two boys and quickly dusted the dirt off them with his palm. "Straighten up," he said in a low voice. "Look presentable."

One of the men in uniform, thin and balding, approached. He munched on an apple, then threw away the core. "What do you have this time, Nosz?" he asked.

"Well, Valad, for you . . ." Nosz began as he hitched up his trousers. He elbowed James to get him to stand straighter. "I have two clever and resourceful house servants, sir."

"I said I wanted to bring a present from Marus for my master," Valad said. "I said nothing about slaves."

"What better present than two house servants from Marus? You know what good workers Marutians make."

The balding man circled James and Glennall, eyeing them from head to foot. "They look like a couple of scamps to me," he said skeptically.

"Beat them regularly and you'll see how hard they

work."

"Lay a hand on me and you'll answer to my father," Glennall challenged.

"Shut up," Nosz ordered as he backhanded him.

Glennall would have fallen to his knees if James hadn't grabbed his arm to help steady him.

"Who's your father, boy?" the man asked.

Nosz nervously interrupted. "The boy is—"

"I wasn't asking you, Nosz," Valad said sharply. He looked at Glennall closely. "Who is your father that I should be afraid of him?"

Glennall rubbed his stung cheek. "He is Connam, the owner of all the lands east of here," he offered boldly.

"I know of Connam," the man said.

"Then you know how powerful he is," said Glennall.

"Indeed I do. I have also seen many of his sons at the auctions in Dremat." A wiry smile crept across the man's face. "And I cannot believe that Connam—or his robust sons—would have a squirt like you for a relative."

The other uniformed men laughed.

Nosz looked relieved. "This boy has a wild imagination," he said.

"I promise you: Connam is my father," Glennall insisted.

"Show me proof," Valad said.

"Take me back to Dremat, and I will show you proof."

"We won't be going all the way back to Dremat to indulge your fantasies," Nosz growled.

"What about you?" Valad asked James. "Do you also have a powerful father?"

"My father is dead," James replied icily.

"And you have no inheritance? No home?"

James lowered his head. "No." Then he added, "But that doesn't make me a slave."

"As good as one now," the man said. He gestured to Nosz. "Deliver them to my master's house with my compliments. If nothing else, he'll enjoy their Marutian spunk."

"And payment?"

"I will pay you when they've been delivered in good order," Valad said.

The deal completed, one of Nosz's thugs herded James and Glennall back into the wagon, chained their arms, and

closed them in. A couple of minutes later, they were bouncing down the road again.

"What will happen to us now?" James wondered aloud.

Glennall shook his head. "I don't trust that Valad character. Did you recognize his uniform?"

"No."

"He's a member of King Akvych's security force."

"I don't know who King Akvych is."

"He is the king of Palatia," Glennall answered with a quizzical look. "And his security force includes some of the most ruthless and disreputable men alive. They occasionally venture into Marus to cause trouble."

"You mean they raid the towns and villages?"

"No. They try to spread dissension among the people who work for the landowners. My father has had to chase them off many times. If the Palatians can get our workers to rebel against the landowners, they'll have an excuse to invade. They'd love nothing more than to get their hands on our country and make us all slaves. That's the kind of people they are."

James thought about this for a moment. "And we've been sold to the master of one of them?"

"So it would seem."

James slid onto his back, rested his chained arms on his chest, and said hopelessly, "Great. It gives me something to look forward to."

Glennall sat quietly for a moment, then said, "I was wondering what would happen if we grabbed hands again, like we did in the cave. The Unseen One may reveal something to us."

"I told you already: I don't believe in that."

"Then there's no harm in trying."

"Why do you need me? You had dreams and visions before I came along."

Glennall responded, "I've been thinking about that. Suppose my dreams and visions were only partly complete. I only saw part of what I needed to see. Just like I only saw part of what happened at the cave, and you saw the other part."

"Sounds like double-talk to me."

"Perhaps when we touch hands, we may see everything we need to see completely."

"Perhaps?" James said, his voice rising over the sound

of the wagon wheels on the dirt. “There is no *perhaps*. This isn’t possible, do you understand? None of it is.”

“Then how do you explain it?”

“I can’t explain it,” James replied stubbornly. “And I don’t have to.”

Glennall reached out his hands, stretching to their limit. “Take my hands.”

James looked at them without moving. “It’s crazy.”

“So you keep saying. Take them anyway.”

“I don’t like it. It gives me the creeps.”

“You may as well try. I won’t leave you alone until you do.”

James looked from Glennall’s hands to his face and back again. On impulse, he grabbed Glennall’s hands in his.

The two boys tensed as they looked at each other. The chains rattled. A horse snorted. The wagon moved on relentlessly.

“Nothing happened,” James observed. “See?”

Glennall shook his head. “That doesn’t mean anything,” he maintained.

“Nothing happened—that’s what it means.”

“The Unseen One does as *He* wills, not as we might wish.”

James sat back. He was relieved, but strangely disappointed.



It took three days to reach Muirk, the capital city of Palatia, as Nosz stopped frequently to sell goods and take orders for future deliveries. Except for those brief moments when they were allowed out to relieve themselves, the two boys remained in the back of the wagon the entire time. But that didn’t stop them from peeking through the slats in the wagon walls.

The buildings in the city weren’t tall—at least, not like the skyscrapers James knew—but they were still impressive with their lavish brickwork, broad columns, and white pillars, ornate designs around the doors and windows, lavish lawns,

and wide avenues. Occasionally James saw what looked liked statues and pyramid-shaped monuments. People shouted, hawkers sold wares from makeshift stalls, vendors offered their best deals, pedestrians dodged between horses, and beggars appealed for alms.

Eventually the traffic and people thinned out as Nosz drove to the outskirts of the city. They passed high walls and wrought-iron gates, behind which sat large mansions of brick and stone and timber, with transomed windows, arched doorways, and tall chimneys.

Nosz slowed at the gate of one such mansion. A guard dressed in a uniform identical to those of Valad and his men checked on Nosz's purpose for being there, then opened the gate to let them through. They traveled down a long driveway, past enormous oaks, and then skirted to the left around the front entrance of the mansion. James caught a glimpse of the wide stone steps leading to double-studded doors with carved, decorative jambs. Stone bay windows lined the first and second stories, each with large, diamond-shaped panes.

They pulled up to a rear entrance, obviously used by the servants. Nosz brought the wagon to a stop. The scar-faced henchman opened the door, undid the boys' chains, and pushed them out. James stretched long and hard.

A middle-aged man with long brown hair, bushy side whiskers, and the posture and shape of a long plank of wood appeared at the back door. He wore a silver jacket over his shirt and breeches—the same kind of jacket James had seen in his dream. The two boys exchanged looks.

The man seemed to recognize Nosz and greeted him formally, and the two men went inside. A couple of minutes later, they returned. Chatting amiably, Nosz signaled his two pals to get back onto the wagon. Then he hesitated near the boys as if he might say something to them, but he merely grunted and walked past.

"I won't forget you, Nosz," Glennall said.

Nosz didn't reply but climbed up onto the driver's bench, barked at the horse to get moving, and drove away.

James had a wild thought about trying to run for it. He considered the vast estate, the many places there must be to hide, and the possibilities a city like Muirk might hold for him. It didn't look as though he'd ever figure out how to get

back to his own world anyway, so why not make the best of it?

Glennall watched him as if he knew what James was thinking. He slowly, almost imperceptibly, shook his head.

"So you're a gift to my master," the man with the sideburns said. "How thoughtful of Valad."

"Where exactly are we?" James asked.

The man with the sideburns quickly struck him across the face. It didn't hurt as much as it startled. "Speak only when you're spoken to," the man commanded. "That's the first rule in this house."

"Yes, sir," James said, rubbing his cheek.

"My name is Tezst, and you two will answer to me," the man said, tucking his thumbs into his waistcoat. It was silver, like the jacket. "It doesn't matter what anyone else tells you, *I* have the final word. Apart from the master, of course. But you probably won't see him much. He's a very busy man. And he likes the servants to be invisible. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," James and Glennall muttered.

"He and his wife are away on the king's business for a couple of weeks, which will give us ample time to train you properly. You will work hard, *very* hard. Your lives are not your own. You live to serve the master now."

James raised his hand, not daring to speak again without permission.

Tezst looked as James's hand as if he didn't understand why it was raised. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I need to ask a question."

"Permission to ask is granted."

"Exactly *who* is the master?"

Tezst looked at James open-mouthed. "You don't know?"

"No, sir."

"He is the head of the king's security forces. His name is Alexx, but you will never call him by name. Now come inside. I will show you your sleeping quarters, arrange to have you bathed and given suitable outfits"—at this he gave James a disapproving look—"and then introduce you to your responsibilities."



Their “quarters” were two small, windowless rooms near the kitchen with bare wooden floors and shelves of supplies on the walls. Each room had a cot, a stand with an oil lamp, and a trunk for any belongings they might have.

“Don’t worry about heat,” Tezst said. “You’ll get plenty of that from the kitchen.”

Much to James’s embarrassment, they were then taken back to the kitchen, where they were forced to strip, get into a large tub of cool water, and be given a hard scrub by an old woman named Ruislip. Glennall didn’t seem to mind at all, as if he were used to it.

Tezst measured James and Glennall for their servant’s uniforms, then sent Cowen, another slave, to the city to fetch them from the tailor. Cowen returned with the clothes a couple of hours later and helped the boys dress properly.

A stooped and bald old man, Cowen shuffled around Glennall and James, muttering as he helped them put on the white shirts and gray breeches, which buttoned to a pair of long, thin stockings, which in turn went into black leather shoes. The outfits were then topped with matching gray waistcoats.

“Now let me look at you,” Cowen said. The old man inspected them, starting with their feet, then slowly raising his eyes, adjusting a button here or picking off lint there, and finally, for the first time, looking full in their faces. “You seem familiar to me,” he said to Glennall. He then turned his attention to James. When they made eye contact, Cowen suddenly jerked his head back as if someone had slapped him in the face.

“What’s wrong?” James asked.

“Nothing,” the old man said. But his voice was full of

something. He glanced back at James's face as if to confirm what he'd seen, then said, "Now follow me and I will explain your responsibilities."

They were told that their day would begin with chopping wood for the many fireplaces around the house and then distributing it to the 16 bedrooms upstairs and the eight rooms downstairs. If the master, his wife, or any of their guests wanted fires lit, James and Glennall must also do that with a minimum of fuss. Cowen then gave them detailed lessons in the art of unobtrusive, smoke-free fire lighting.

After the wood was taken care of, they would help Ruislip and her assistants to prepare and serve breakfast, usually porridge, eggs, and large slabs of bacon. Then they were to clean the dishes. The same was true for all the meals. Lunch was a fairly simple course of bread, cheese, and an assortment of carved meats. Dinner was a more formal and elaborate four-course meal: a soup made of a selected vegetable, fish or fowl, red meat or mutton with fresh vegetables, and some sort of dessert. In between the various meals, they were to help the other house servants clean the rooms, dust the furniture, wash and wax the floors, polish silver, and, in the evenings, see that the lamps were lit throughout the house.

Other than that, they were at the beck and call of whoever needed them.

"This is worse than living at Aunt Edna's," James whispered to Glennall at one point.

Cowen explained that, as house servants, they were to be nearly invisible. "You may be seen but never noticed," he said. "Never draw attention to yourselves. And never appear as if your work is hard. The master wants us to look dignified at all times. That's why he dresses us better than most slaves."

Their first morning of work came quicker than the two young men would have liked. It was still dark, and the early spring dew chilled them. But they were soon hot and sweaty from chopping wood. This was made worse by the overwhelming heat from the two brick ovens in the kitchen, which Ruislip kept lit most of the day. By the end of breakfast, James thought that every muscle in his body had gone stiff.

James noticed that Glennall didn't groan or complain. Instead, he kept a fixed smile on his face the entire time he worked. "Aren't you stiff and sore?" James asked.

Glennall nodded.

"But you don't show it."

Glennall's smile was cold and humorless. He answered through gritted teeth, "We're never to make our work look hard, remember? Besides, I'm practicing for my brothers."

"Your brothers?"

"I never want them to see my pain," he replied. "I will bear what I must with a smile. I will suffer whatever I must suffer secretly. I will store it in my heart and relish it until the day when I see my brothers again."

"And then what?"

"Then I will smile while the Unseen One makes things right."

True to Glennall's resolve, James never heard him complain.

By the evening of the first day, all James could do was lie in bed and moan. Later, however, Cowen brought him a bottle filled with a thick yellow liquid. "Rub this into your muscles, and you'll feel better by morning," Cowen said.

"What is it?" James asked.

"An ointment from our country."

"*Our* country?"

"Marus," Cowen replied. "I heard that you and the young man are from Marus. I am from Marus as well."

"I'm not from Marus," James said as he began to put the ointment on his legs. Almost immediately, he felt a soothing warmth sink deep into his aches. He felt better.

"I misheard, then."

"Not really. I was *brought* from Marus. But I'm really from . . ." He hesitated, not sure of how to answer. "I'm from somewhere else."

Cowen leaned forward and said quietly, "I know where you are from."

"You do?" James whispered back.

Cowen nodded. "You are wise to keep your mouth shut. At least until we know what's to be done."

"Huh?"

Cowen put a finger to his lips and stood up. "Use the ointment sparingly," he said. "There isn't much." Then he left the room.

Long after Cowen had left and he was supposed to be asleep, James pondered their conversation. Could it be that

Cowen was from *his* world?

Over the next few days, James looked for an opportunity to talk to Cowen again, but Cowen seemed to avoid James at every turn. Even Glennall noticed it.

"Did you say something to offend him?" Glennall asked James.

James told Glennall about the odd conversation they'd had.

Glennall was excited to hear it. "Why didn't you tell me right away?" he asked.

"Because you make such a big deal out of everything and start yapping about the Unseen One and all that nonsense."

Glennall frowned. "That's no reason to keep secrets from me. Don't you see? Our paths have joined. We're on the same road together, linked for some hidden purpose. So we mustn't keep any secrets from each other."

James merely grunted. It was exactly what he figured Glennall would say.

"Another Marutian!" Glennall went on. "Wonderful! Perhaps the Unseen One has brought us together to plan an escape!"

"Don't be such a chowderhead," James said. "It's a *coincidence*, that's all." But in his heart, James wondered if Cowen might know how to get him back to his own world.

A couple of days later, James and Glennall were assigned to clean the downstairs rooms. They began with the two modest drawing rooms. Then they moved on to the larger banquet hall. Next they worked in the smaller dining room, which was used for informal meals. From there they cleaned the master's "meeting" room. The master also had a library and a separate room for games, such as billiards, darts, and table tennis.

The last room they cleaned was the master's study. For James, it was the most impressive—a large, richly furnished room dominated by an enormous stone fireplace with columns on each side and sculpted patterns of diamonds along the top. A coat of arms took up most of the overmantel. Fitted bookcases stretched out from both sides of the fireplace. Large framed paintings of great Palatian battles with Palatian soldiers vanquishing all enemies adorned the walls. The master's desk, made of dark oak, sat in the center on a woven

carpet filled with geometric designs of red, black, and gold.

James was awed by the room. Glennall shrugged it off. "My father's study is better than this," he said and wandered to the desk. He nonchalantly picked up the stacks of papers and opened a large ledger that sat on the side.

"What are you doing?" James asked.

Glennall pulled out a rag that had been tucked in his back pocket. "I'm wiping the dust from the furniture, as we were told." He sat down in the chair and absentmindedly rubbed the rag around while he studied the papers and ledger.

"But you're not supposed to *look* at the master's things."

Glennall chuckled. "There are a lot of negative numbers in this ledger."

"It's none of your business."

"The master is spending more than he's earning."

"Get away from there."

"Part of the problem is that he's investing heavily in King Akvych's mines in the west. Everyone knows they're petering out. They reached their peak years ago."

"If he wants to go broke, let him go broke."

"And then what? He'll have to sell us. If I have to be a slave, I'd rather be a slave in a rich man's house than in some hovel or on a ship."

"But—"

Glennall picked up a quill pen, dipped it in the inkwell, and started to write.

"Are you nuts?" James whispered, keeping a panicked eye on the door.

"I'm writing a note to the master. It will help him."

"Maybe he doesn't want your help."

"He'll want this help," Glennall replied. "I'm telling him something that no one outside my family knows—that we have just struck a rich vein of silver in two of our mines. The richest in either Marus or Palatia. If Alexx invests now, he'll make a solid profit."

"Tezst will kill you for doing such a thing."

"He need never know it was me. I won't sign the note."

"It's trouble."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. When is the master supposed to return?"

"In three days, I heard."

"Good. He'll still have time to secure his investment."

The three days came and went in a blur of work. When Alexx and his wife, whose name was Sedras, were expected to return from their trip, Tezst ordered the entire staff of slaves and paid servants—about 30 in all—to line the front foyer. They looked like a military parade as they stretched from the wide marble staircase to the double front doors.

"Eyes to the front!" Tezst shouted as the front doors were opened. It was raining outside, a heavy downpour. A coach pulled up to the porch steps. A heavyset man in a gray military uniform, like those worn by the men in the field, stepped down from the coach. He quickly ascended the steps and, framed in the doorway, nodded stiffly to Tezst and then entered.

James and Glennall exchanged glances. Alexx was the man in the dream they'd both had in the mine shaft.

A woman appeared from behind Alexx. She also was heavyset, and she had a pinched, disapproving face and hair pulled back in a tight bun. She wore a large hooded cloak fastened at her neck with a jewel. Underneath was a wide dress of satin that hid the movements of her legs. The effect made her look as if she floated on a cushion of air.

"Welcome home, Mistress, Master," Tezst said.

"Thank you, Tezst," Alexx said. "It is good to be back."

Tezst guided Alexx and Sedras toward James and Glennall. "We welcome you with two gifts from your good friend Valad," he said by way of introduction. "Two slaves from Marus."

"Indeed? From Marus?" Alexx said. "Oh, how kind of Valad."

"I wonder what he wants from you," Sedras said cynically. As they continued across the foyer, she stepped on a slick of water, and suddenly her legs flew out from under her skirt, and she fell flat on her bottom.

Everyone gasped. James thought she looked like someone straight out of a Charlie Chaplin film. The sight made him want to laugh.

"My dear!" Alexx cried out as he and Tezst helped her to her feet.

Embarrassed, she shouted, "What kind of servants do we have when the floors are covered with water?"

"We must've brought the water in with us," Alexx observed calmly.

“Greater care should’ve been taken!” she shouted, nearly slipping again. Alexx and Tezst grabbed her elbows quickly. James had to put his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud. This caught Sedras’s attention. “Are you *laughing?”* she demanded.

James stiffened his mouth. “No, ma’am,” he said, instantly serious.

“*Madam,* you ignorant creature,” she hissed. “I am a *madam.*”

James corrected himself. *“Madam*—er, no, Madam.”

“I think I should like to see you soundly whipped!” she shouted again. She jerked her arms away from her husband and Tezst. “Let go of me! I’m not an invalid.” She took another step and slid again, this time forward into James and Glennall. They both caught her.

In that moment, James was no longer standing in the foyer but deep in the core of the earth—in a mine. He was stripped to the waist, digging into a solid wall of stone. Black dust fell around him, filling the air, filling his lungs. He coughed. Next to him, Glennall also dug. Sweat poured from both of them. They had been working for hours. Days. Weeks.

Glennall turned to him and said, “Evil intentions, good consequences. The Unseen One will see to that. But it will get worse before it gets better.”

“What?” James asked.

“I said to unhand me!” Sedras snarled. Her face had gone pale, as if she’d seen a ghost.

James was confused. He looked at Glennall.

Glennall looked startled.

They had shared another dream, another vision.

“I want to go to my bedroom immediately,” Sedras said to her husband, a lamentable tone in her voice. “I’m not feeling well.”

“Yes, dear,” Alexx said. “It’s been a long journey.”

Tezst signaled two chambermaids to accompany Sedras to her room.

After she’d been whisked away, Tezst glared at James and Glennall, but he spoke to Alexx. “My most profound apologies, Master,” he said. “I’ll have these two beaten immediately.”

“For what?” Alexx asked.

“For daring to lay hands on the mistress.”

"She had fallen, Tezst. They were trying to help."

Tezst gestured to James. "This one seemed to find her predicament amusing."

Alexx gave James a sympathetic look. "*I* would have been amused too," he declared, then added wearily, "but if I'd laughed, she would have punished me in far worse ways than you can ever punish them. Forget the incident. Let's get on with our work." With that, he walked off toward his study.

Tezst clapped his hands to dismiss the servants. James and Glennall started to leave, but he grabbed their shoulders. "The master was in a good mood today," he fumed. "But you had better watch yourselves in the future. Another incident like that, and I'll personally thrash you."

James was getting ready for bed when Glennall crept into his room. They hadn't had a chance all day to talk about what had happened.

"Well?" Glennall said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

James was tired and wanted to go to sleep. "Well, what?" he responded crossly.

"Are you going to deny it?"

"Deny what?"

"The vision. You saw it, I'm sure. The two of us, slaving in the mines."

"I saw it."

"What do you think it means?"

James answered glibly, "It probably means we're going to wind up slaving in the mines."

Glennall nodded. "The Unseen One is warning us."

"Warning us about what?" James asked impatiently. "In one dream, Alexx is commending us for something, and in another dream we're slaving in the mines. I wish your Unseen One would make up His mind."

"One dream doesn't make the other untrue."

"Then what does it mean?"

"It means exactly what we think it means: We will be praised and then punished."

"Praised for what, and punished for what?" James climbed under his covers, using his feet to push Glennall off the bed. "It's a lot of hooey."

Glennall didn't reply.

James suddenly had an idea. "I know what'll happen," he said. "We'll get punished because *you* were messing around

with the master's desk."



The next morning, as James and Glennall finished chopping the wood, Cowen appeared at the back door. He had an anxious look on his face and wrung his hands nervously. "Come quickly," he instructed. "Tezst wants the entire staff to meet in the kitchen."

"Is something wrong?" Glennall asked.

"Come quickly. Don't dillydally." Cowen retreated into the house.

"Uh-oh," James said as he stuck his ax into a log. They went inside.

The entire staff had assembled around the large kitchen. Tezst made a grand entrance, marching back and forth in front of them with a dark look of disapproval on his face. "Who did it?" he finally asked.

Everyone looked at the others fearfully.

"Did what, sir?" one of the older servants asked.

Tezst held up a piece of paper. "Who wrote *this* to the master?"

James felt the blood rush from his face. It was the note Glennall had written.

The tension in the room felt alive, like a buzzing bee on a windowpane.

"Someone had better answer soon, or I will systematically beat the truth from each of you."

Glennall stepped forward and confessed, "I am the author of that note, sir."

Tezst looked unsurprised. He grunted. "I could have guessed," he said as he walked over to face Glennall. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" Glennall asked.

Tezst clipped him on the side of the head. "You dare to

ask me questions? You are going to see the master. And then I will take great relish in beating the living daylights out of you." Tezst marched him to the kitchen door, then turned to face the uneasy crowd again. "Go back to your duties."

"Oh, my," Cowen muttered.

James returned to work. A little later, as he was sweeping one of the upstairs hallways, he saw Tezst come out of Sedras's room. He looked surprised to see James there.

"Are you spying on me?" he demanded.

"No, sir. I'm sweeping the floor," James replied meekly.

Tezst looked dubious, then said, "I have no doubt that you were in on your friend's prank."

James didn't reply.

"If I had my way, you'd both be sent to the mines. I didn't trust you the first time I set eyes on you."

James merely watched him. He figured that if he spoke he would get slapped again. Just then a bell rang.

"Ah, it's the master," Tezst said with glee. "He probably wants me to dispose of your friend."

Finishing his chores upstairs, James returned to the kitchen to help Ruislip with lunch preparations. He was peeling potatoes when Tezst came in and tersely announced that the master wanted the entire staff to gather in the front foyer. He left again before James could tell whether he was pleased or angry.

Assembled for the second time that day, the staff stood watchful and silent. A door slammed down the hall, and within seconds Alexx approached in his usual military gait. Glennall and Tezst followed behind in a small procession. *Soldiers on parade*, James thought.

"I have an announcement to make," Alexx said as he clasped his hands behind his back. "Young Glennall here will no longer be serving with you."

James felt the muscles in his neck tense. He balled his hands into fists.

"Instead," Alexx continued, "he will replace Tezst as the keeper of my accounts."

There was a collective intake of air from everyone present. Tezst maintained an expression of calm, as if the news made no difference to him.

"Of course, Tezst will continue to manage the household and serve in his many other functions. You will

answer to him as always," Alexx added. He paused as if he had something else to say, then turned on his heel and marched back to his study.

Tezst clapped his hands. "Back to work!" he ordered.

The crowd dispersed. James rushed to Glennall. "Congratulations!" James said happily.

"Yes," Tezst said. "Congratulations. I didn't enjoy being a *bookkeeper* anyway." He said *bookkeeper* as if it were the same as shoveling manure. He walked off.

Glennall waited until Tezst was out of earshot, then said, "Alexx thought my advice was too good to be true. So I explained to him who I am and how I knew."

"What did he say?"

"He said he had somehow suspected that I was from good breeding," Glennall replied with a hint of self-importance. "Then we chatted about a few financial strategies, and the next thing I knew, he put me in charge of his accounts."

"But if he knows where you're from, why won't he return you to your family?"

Glennall shook his head. "Palatians don't think that way. I'm a slave, regardless of my background. However, if I do well as his accountant, I may be able to earn my freedom."

"It's perfect."

"Unless I don't do the job very well. Then he'll probably kill me."

"Oh," James looked at him warily. "*Can* you do the job?"

"I can certainly do it better than Tezst did." He dropped his voice to a low whisper. "I think Tezst was juggling the books, stealing money from the master."

"He looks the type. It's those shifty eyes," James joked. He glanced around. "I'd better get back to work before he realizes I'm still talking to you. He's probably itching to give me a beating since he can't beat you now."

Glennall smiled. "He can't beat *you* anymore either," he said with obvious satisfaction.

"Why not?"

"Because I persuaded Alexx to make you my assistant."

"You're kidding."

"You'll still have various jobs to do around the house—fetch me new ledgers, make sure my inkwell is filled, things

like that. But you answer to me now. Not Tezst."

James laughed. "That's super! Thanks!"

Glennall moved toward the kitchen. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"Our first job is to go to town to buy new jackets."

"Why new jackets?"

"Because we're not just house servants anymore. We're special, so we don't have to wear the regular gray jackets. Alexx wants us to have silver jackets instead, just like the one Tezst wears."

"And just like we saw in our dream," James added.

"Which dream is that?" Glennall asked, feigning ignorance. "Or do you mean the dream you don't believe in?"

James blushed.



In the weeks that followed Glennall's appointment as the accounts keeper, James found himself busier than he'd ever been in his life. He had thought being Glennall's assistant would be easy. Instead, it meant that he had to run into town regularly to deliver or receive messages about Alexx's investments. Glennall had also put James in charge of the house provisions, inventorying stocks of food and supplies to make sure the master's money wasn't being wasted.

The master was ecstatic about Glennall's abilities and James's hard work. The investments from Marus quickly yielded more money than Alexx could have imagined.

One afternoon, he called the two of them to the front foyer and in front of the entire house commended them. It was the fulfillment of the first dream James and Glennall had shared.

Tezst kept a stony expression on his face.

Sedras, the master's wife, cooed and fawned over the two of them and made a public declaration of forgiveness. "I haven't forgotten how you two naughty boys behaved the first time I met you," she said. "But all is well now. You've made my husband very happy and prosperous. And if he's happy, then I'm happy."

Alexx kissed his wife's hand. "You are a treasure," he said.

Later that night, Alexx was summoned to the king's palace to discuss matters of state. Glennall decided to use the master's study to go over the ledgers and asked James to join him. It was their habit for James to sit near Glennall at the desk and, like a secretary, write down a list of things Glennall thought should be done with various accounts and investments. It was a warm evening, so they opened a window and enjoyed the sound of the crickets outside.

"This is a pretty good life, isn't it?" James asked.

Glennall was only half-listening. "Pretty good for a couple of slaves, I suppose," he answered.

James leaned back in his chair. For him, it was pretty good by any standard.

Someone knocked gently on the door, and then it opened. To their surprise, Sedras entered the room. She wore an elegant, green velvet dress with a lace collar and large cuffs on the sleeves. Her hair was drawn off her face into a bun, and ringlets dangled in front of her ears.

Out of respect, Glennall and James leaped to their feet.

"Hello, boys," she said with a thin smile as she drifted around the room. "Hard at work, I see."

"Yes, madam," Glennall acknowledged.

She seemed to float up to the desk. "You're so very hard-working and efficient," she flattered.

"We do our best," Glennall said.

"Yes, you do." She chuckled lightly for no apparent reason, then said, "Sometimes, though, I wish you weren't as good as you are."

"Madam?" Glennall asked, puzzled.

"Your efficient control of my husband's money is making it very hard for me to get at it."

"You have money," Glennall reminded her. "Your husband gives you a generous allowance."

She rolled her eyes as if burdened by his response. "But it simply isn't enough," she insisted.

"Then you should talk to your husband."

"He's such a bore about these things," she said, stifling a yawn. "It would please me so much more if you would give me extra funds."

"I can't without his permission."

"You could if I made it worth your while." She smiled at them. "And I *could* make it worth your while."

Glennall clasped his hands behind his back, as Alexx so often did, and stiffened his back. "We're not interested," he said softly.

"Aren't you?" she said, false surprise in her voice. "Are you saying you *don't* want your freedom?"

James felt his mouth go dry. He tightened his fists at his sides, the knuckles going white like the feather on a quill pen.

Glennall spoke, but there was a catch in his throat. "You're offering us our freedom?"

"Of course. Serve me well and I will serve you well. It's the way of the world."

"Only the master can free us," Glennall observed.

Sedras waved her arm as if she could brush the words from the air. "I need only speak to the master, and he'll do it."

"If it's so easy to persuade him," Glennall said doubtfully, "why don't you speak to the master about your need for more money?"

She chuckled again as she leaned on the desk, a polite smile frozen on her face. Her tone was thick with anger. "Don't toy with me, boy," she threatened. "I know more about you than you think. I know who you are and where you come from. I also know that the two of you engage in some sort of witch-work."

"Witch-work!" James exclaimed.

"The day you both touched me, I saw a vision. A vision of both of you in the mines. It was as real to me as you are now."

"What about it?" Glennall asked coolly.

"You both have some kind of magic in you. I believe you could use that magic for me."

Glennall shook his head. "It doesn't work that way."

"Confound it, boy, do you want your freedom or don't you?"

"Not if it means deceiving the master. We wouldn't dream of betraying him. Nor would I betray my allegiance to the Unseen One by doing what you ask. It's wrong."

"You Marutians are so self-righteous," she said with a scowl. "And look where it's put you, *slave*."

Glennall didn't respond.

She sighed and walked to the door. "I can be a good

friend," she said, "but I am a worse enemy. I have the power to make the vision of the mines come true." With that, she left.

"That's bad news," James said. He tugged at his collar. The room suddenly seemed hot.

Glennall swallowed hard. His hands shook nervously. "May the Unseen One protect us," he whispered.

"You did the right thing," James assured him. "I don't trust her any farther than I could throw her."

Glennall looked puzzled over the statement, as if he wanted to ask James *why* he would throw someone. Instead he said, "Will you hand me the ledgers from the past year? I want to look again at Tezst's bookkeeping. Something tells me that if he was embezzling money from the master, he might have been doing it for *her*."

James went to the shelf where the ledgers were kept and began to pull out a couple of them. His mind was buzzing with a question. When he put the ledgers in front of Glennall, he asked, "Why does a woman like that need more money than she already has? It's not like she's hurting for anything."

"Perhaps it's sheer greed," Glennall speculated. "Or she's up to something."

"She's up to something, all right. But what?"



Glennall sent James into Muirk the next afternoon to deliver instructions to Alexx's bank manager. The manager told James to come back in an hour for a return message. James decided to use the time to get a better look at the city.

Walking along High Avenue, as they called it, he enjoyed the sights and smells of the bakeries, the butcher shops, the fresh vegetable stands, and the fish shops. He also saw clothing stores, weavers, tailors, and tobacconists, all nestled in among offices containing lawyers, doctors, and businessmen.

His eye caught a colorful sign at the end of an alley, and James decided to follow it. "Win or Lose," it read. A bright arrow pointed the way. He wondered what kind of shop could allow someone to win or lose—or *what* one could win or lose there. As he approached the door, it opened, and Tezst stepped out. His brow was furrowed, and his mouth turned down as he glared at James.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

James stepped back for fear the man might strike out at him. "I'm running errands for Glennall," he replied.

"Well, you'd be well advised to forget you saw me," Tezst said. "Now get out of my way," he added as he pushed past James. His boot heels clicked loudly as he strode down the stone pavement toward the avenue.

James looked at the door of the Win or Lose shop. He had no doubt what it was. "A gambling joint," he said to himself.

Glennall was consulting with the master for the rest of the afternoon, so James didn't have a chance to tell him what had happened with Tezst. He moved around the house impatiently, certain the accidental meeting was important.

What if Tezst had been stealing from the master to pay for his gambling losses? But then, what did that have to do with Sedras?

"Why do you pace like a lion in a cage?" Cowen asked him when he'd wandered into the kitchen for the fifth time in an hour.

"I need to talk to Glennall."

"About what?"

James eyed Cowen for a moment, trying to decide whether to tell him. He decided not to. "Something private."

"Private I understand," Cowen said, his head nodding precariously in front of his stooped body. "We all have things we keep private."

James's face betrayed the question mark in his mind. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'm saying only that there are things to discuss out loud and other things to be said in whispers." The man closed his eyes, his head still bobbing up and down. "I've been watching you ever since you arrived."

"And avoiding me, too," James added. "You haven't said two words to me since that night you gave me the ointment for my muscles."

"Things must be done in their proper time."

"What things?"

"Talking, planning, hoping, praying . . ."

James was beginning to think the man had gone senile.

Cowen poked a bony finger into his chest. "I know about you. The hand of the Unseen One is upon you."

"Oh, really?"

"It's in the color of your eyes. It's in the blessings you've received. Do you think they're accidents? No. But the time is coming for you to go home."

"I *am* home," James responded, meaning every word. He felt settled now. Secure. It was the most at-home he'd felt since his parents died. "This is my home now," he repeated firmly.

The old man *tsked* disapprovingly. "This is not your home."

James decided to see just how much the man knew. "If this isn't my home, then where is it?"

"Not here. Not even in Marus. You come from other parts."

“Would you mind if we quit playing this game and put our cards on the table?”

The old man looked quizzical, then said, “You don’t belong here. And the time is coming for you to leave.”

“*Leave*? You think I’m going to try to escape?”

“Ah,” Cowen answered with a smile, as if enjoying the thought. “Escape. Perhaps we all will. Perhaps the Unseen One sent you to us for that purpose, to help us escape what is to come.”

James had lost his patience. “You keep talking in circles,” he scoffed. He turned and pushed through the door into the main part of the house. As he did, he nearly collided with Tezst.

“Watch where you’re going, boy,” Tezst snapped.

James apologized and continued on his way to the study. By the time he reached the door, he had begun to wonder if Tezst had heard any of the conversation. He thought no more about it, though, because the study door was open. Glennall sat at the desk, the quill feather jerking as he wrote.

“Done with your important meeting?” James asked.

Glennall didn’t look up. “The master and his wife had a dinner engagement in the city this evening,” he responded. “We’ll continue tomorrow.”

“I need to talk to you.”

“You’d better close the door.”

James did, then sat down in the guest chair facing the desk.

Glennall stood up, stretched hard, then sat down again. “I figured out how Tezst stole the money from the master,” Glennall said. “He lied about the amounts of food and supplies he was buying for the house.”

“Did you tell the master?”

“Not yet. I plan to tell him tomorrow—*if* I can come up with a sensible explanation for why Tezst, a man well cared for and in one of the best positions in the country, would steal like that.”

“I think I have the answer.”

Glennall raised an eyebrow.

“Gambling,” James said.

“What makes you think so?”

“I saw Tezst in the city today. He was coming out of a

betting shop. I was thinking, *What if he has a problem with gambling?* You know, what if he can't control himself? And then he loses his money and has to raise even more."

Glennall shook his head in disbelief. "Tezst? He doesn't seem like the kind of person who'd do that."

"I'm just telling you what I saw today. Why else would he be there unless he was gambling his money away?"

Glennall rested his elbows on the desk. "Which gambling shop did he go to?"

"The Win or Lose, in an alley off High Avenue."

"I need you to go back there. Tell whoever is in charge that you're on an errand for the master. Warn him that if he doesn't cooperate, the security forces will descend on his shop like a terrible plague."

"The owner won't believe me."

Glennall snatched up a piece of paper and quickly scribbled a note. He then sealed it with Alexx's stamp and handed it to James. "Give him this," he instructed.

"What will you do?"

"Finish putting together my evidence from these ledgers. Then I'll show everything to the master tomorrow morning." Glennall smiled. "Well done, James."



It took James 20 minutes to run to the edge of the city and another 10 to weave his way through the shortcuts that got him to the center. By the time he had reached the door of the Win or Lose, it was locked. He knocked anyway. No one responded. He continued to knock until his knuckles hurt. Then he saw a rope for a bell to the right side and began pulling it again and again. If anyone were inside, the noise would be annoying enough to force him to open up.

Sure enough, James soon heard the door unlatch from the other side. It opened a tiny crack, and a young man peered out at him. "What do you want?" the man inquired. "We're closed."

"I'm here on behalf of the head of the security forces," James replied.

"You're lying," the young man said with a frown and started to close the door.

James wedged his foot in. "I'm not lying," he insisted. "And you'd better open this door, or you'll have no end of trouble with the security forces." He thrust Glennall's note at the young man.

The young man looked at the seal, opened and read the note, scrutinized James for a moment, then said, "What's Alexx want with me? To place a bet? Ha! Everybody knows he hates gambling. So what does he want with me?"

"I'm here to ask about his servant."

"Tezst. What about him?"

"He was here earlier today."

"So?"

"How often does he come in?"

"That depends on whether the missus has any money."

"The missus?"

"Alexx's wife."

James tried to keep his composure. "Tezst is here to bet for *Sedras?"*

The young man frowned again. "You must be a stranger. Everybody knows the missus likes to bet. Well, everybody except Alexx. She's done a pretty good job of keeping it from him."

"Until now."

"You're going to tell him? Good luck."

James headed back up the alley.

The young man shouted after him, "Tell Alexx his wife owes us a lot of money. Personal checks accepted!"

The entire way back to the mansion, James tried to decide what to do. It was one thing for Tezst to steal from the master to support a gambling problem of his own. It was another for the master's *wife* to have the problem. How would he react to the news? Would he be pleased that Glennall and James had uncovered the truth? Or would he angrily hold it against them for bringing to light an embarrassing and potentially scandalous piece of news? James hoped Glennall hadn't done anything yet. They needed to talk it over first.

James knew something was wrong as soon as he arrived at the back door of the mansion. Valad, the officer who had purchased James and Glennall as a gift for Alexx, was in the kitchen with some of his men. Two of them had Glennall by

the arms. Tezst stood in the corner with his arms folded and an indignant look on his face.

Even more surprising was that Alexx and Sedras, dressed in their fancy dinner clothes, were standing near the door.

"What's going on?" James asked.

Rough hands were quickly on his arms and shoulders as Valad's men grabbed him.

Glennall looked helplessly at James. His eyes moved to a small stack of money on the table.

"We'll ask the questions here!" Valad growled.

"You're making a big mistake," Glennall told them.

"I'll be the judge of that," Alexx said. He looked stern and unhappy.

"I knew they were nothing but trouble," Sedras complained. "It was their lack of respect."

Glennall pleaded, "Master, please hear me out."

Alexx pointed to the money on the table. "What was my money doing under your mattress?"

"I don't know," Glennall replied. "Someone must've put it there."

"*You* put it there," Sedras said. "After you stole it from my husband."

"I didn't!" Glennall cried out. "Why would I?"

Tezst stepped forward hesitantly. "I regret to say that I might have the answer to that question," he offered. All eyes turned to him. He looked grieved to speak the words. "I overheard *this* one"—he gestured to James—"talking to one of the other servants about escaping. Since these two boys are like peas in a pod, it's easy to conclude that they stole the money to buy their way back to Marus."

"That's not true!" James shouted. "We aren't trying to escape!"

"You deny talking to Cowen earlier about escaping?" Tezst challenged him. "Or do you call me a liar?"

James didn't answer for fear that it might get Cowen in trouble. His mind raced for something to say, but he couldn't think of anything.

Tezst shrugged and turned to Alexx. "There you are. His silence is the same as an admission."

"This is a setup," James finally muttered.

"We didn't steal any money." Glennall sneered at Tezst.

"*You're* the one who's been stealing from the master. You have been for months!"

"Where is your proof?" Alexx asked.

"In your ledgers! I can show you how he did it."

Alexx looked unconvinced. "But why? Why should Tezst steal from me? He's a free man. He may come and go as he pleases. He is more than adequately compensated for his work here. And a more frugal man I've never met in my life."

"And you're welcome to search my apartment," Tezst said confidently. "Produce evidence of money I've stolen or anything I've ever purchased with such money."

"Has he told you about his gambling problem?" Glennall said to Alexx.

James cringed as the room went coldly silent.

Tezst looked aghast. "He's obviously willing to say *anything* to get out of this trouble," he suggested. "I promise you, master, that I have no such problem."

Alexx leaned toward Glennall. "You'll have to come up with something better than that to persuade me!" he warned. "Tezst is no gambling man."

"*He* may not be a gambler," James put in nervously, his heart pumping like a rabbit's, "but someone else is!"

"What are you saying?" Alexx demanded.

"Tezst goes to the gambling shop to place bets for someone else."

Glennall stared wide-eyed at James.

Sedras took a step forward. Her face was pale, her eyes flashing defiantly. "*Who* is he acting for, boy?" she barked.

James tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. The effort made a harsh clicking sound. "You!" he croaked.

Sedras stumbled back dramatically as if James had struck her. "*What?"* she shrieked.

"You go too far, boy," Valad said.

Sedras waved her hands like fans. "I must sit down. This is too much for me." She clung to a chair. James thought it was an impressive performance.

Alexx moved around the table. His face was red, though a slight scar across his forehead shone white. "You're accusing *my wife* of gambling?" he asked. "And not only gambling but using my trusted servant to do so? And . . . and . . . of *stealing* from me to support her activities?"

James knew then that their situation was hopeless. It

was too much to expect Alexx to believe. All the proof in the world wouldn't convince him.

"We would never lie to you, sir," Glennall said softly.

Alexx turned on him. "And my *wife* would lie to me? My trusted servant, who has been with me for years, would lie to me?" He brought his fist down hard on the table. "I've heard enough. Dress them in their old clothes. I don't want to lose those new uniforms. Then take them away, Valad."

Valad signaled his men, and they yanked the two boys to their feet.

"But where are we going?" James asked. "Where are you taking us?"

Valad looked to Alexx to answer the question. Alexx turned his face away from them all. "To the mines," he replied.



The journey to Palatia with Nosz now seemed like a family picnic compared to Glennall and James's trip to the mines. After Valad had dragged them from Alexx's mansion, they were taken to a decaying building in the city center where they were handed over to a wiry, greasy-haired man named Cleo. The moment Valad was out of sight, Cleo took great pleasure in thrashing both boys with a stick. He said nothing but cackled happily. He then kicked at them until they cowered in the middle of the floor. At that point, he threw a switch and a trapdoor fell open, sending James and Glennall to a dark room below.

They landed hard on a wet stone floor. Winded, cut, and bruised, they lay silently for a moment. Then they realized they were surrounded by other prisoners. Men, women, and one or two children, all in rags, stared vacantly at them.

One of the men laughed and said in a low, gruff voice, "New recruits." A toothless old man laughed with him.

"Any broken bones?" James gasped to Glennall.

With great effort, Glennall sat up and replied, "I don't think so."

"Quiet down there!" the wiry man shouted from above.

They spent the entire night and the following day in that dank hole. Occasionally the trapdoor opened again, allowing more prisoners to fall painfully into their midst.

James felt cold and ill. He hoped he wasn't coming down with a terrible disease, but he wouldn't have doubted it considering the stench and germs that now surrounded him.

The next afternoon, the large wooden door at the end of the pit opened. Three muscular men entered with muskets. A fourth man stepped in with a whip in his hands. With a great

display of whip cracking and gesturing with the muskets, they chained the prisoners' ankles and wrists, then drove them from the room to a tunnel. The look and smell made James think they were in a sewer somewhere. At the end of the tunnel, they reached an oversized and windowless wagon. Six mangy horses were hitched to the front. Once or twice, James felt the sting of the lash on his back as they were herded into the wagon.

There was hardly room for them all. Sitting down was impossible, so the prisoners stood there, pressed together, smelling of sweat and rotten clothes and other disgusting things.

Once they were all squeezed in, a driver shouted "Yah!" followed by the sharp crack of a whip. The horses lurched forward.

"Where are the mines in Palatia?" James whispered to Glennall.

"In the southern mountains," Glennall whispered back.

"How far are the southern mountains from here?"

Glennall seemed unsure. Then, "Four days in a wagon."

"They won't keep us cooped up in here the whole time, will they?"

Glennall looked away.

"They'll give us water and some food, right?"

"I hope so," Glennall said hopelessly.

The prisoners eventually worked out a system whereby they could take turns sitting down. A woman wept constantly, her wailing high and shrill.

The road jostled them into each other. A fight broke out between two men when one accidentally elbowed the other in the eye. The driver and the guards didn't seem to care.

James did something he never thought he could do: He slept standing up. But that was a luxury; sleep rarely came. Mostly he thought about how thirsty he felt and how tight his stomach was getting. And the sun, heating up the wagon for more than 12 hours each day, seemed more than he could bear.

"May the Unseen One have mercy," Glennall whispered hoarsely at one point.

James closed his eyes and joined in the prayer. *Have mercy*, he said in his heart to the Unseen One. When he was living in the comfort of Alexx's mansion, it had seemed easy

to scoff at Glennall's belief. But now that he was in chains, thirsty and tired, such faith seemed like the only thing that could help them.

Late in the afternoon on the third day, they heard a distant crash of thunder. Soon after, they heard rain tapping on the wagon's roof. Then the water began to leak through. The prisoners clamored to stretch up their hands and faces to drink in what they could.

Conversations started after that, as if the refreshment had given them all new voices. "Why are you here?" was the common question. But the answers were as diverse as the people who gave them. One man was accused by a neighbor of stealing a goat, another of cheating his partner in business. One woman said she'd been caught taking an apple for her child. James noticed that everyone was accused, but no one claimed to be guilty. The only people who were guilty were those slaves who'd been captured in other countries. But they were guilty only of having the wrong color of skin or the wrong accent.

The rain continued to fall, and now that everyone's thirst had been quenched, it became a nuisance. The relentless drips from the roof soaked them to the skin.

"Maybe we should pray for the Unseen One to turn the water off now," Glennall said to James.

James smiled wearily, then suggested that they try to find a way to capture the water. "The rain may stop, and we'll get thirsty again," he explained.

This gave the prisoners something to think about and do. Eventually someone suggested that any boots without holes should be used. Just as they agreed it was a good idea, the wagon hit a bump, sending them all up in the air, and then down came everything with a hard thud. The driver and guards shouted to one another outside. A moment later, the door in the back opened.

One of the guards snarled at them. The rain poured down his face. "Everyone out," he barked. "We've hit a rock, and we're stuck in the mud."

The prisoners filed out silently, their chains rattling like discordant Christmas bells. James eyed the area. Woods lined both sides of the road. He considered his chances of running for it.

Just then the guard cautioned, "There are 27 of you. If

there are any less when we leave, you'll *all* be killed."

"As if we could run in these chains!" someone said.

It took almost half an hour for the prisoners to push the wagon out of the muddy ditch. The rain stopped in the meantime, and James was sad to realize they hadn't saved any of the water for later.

One of the younger prisoners dared to ask if they would get anything to eat. A guard hit him in the head with the butt of his musket in reply.

Corralled back into the wagon, the prisoners began the journey again, resuming their system of sitting and standing in turns.

As night fell, the air got cooler as the wagon made its way into the mountains. James dreamed he was back at Aunt Edna's, eating some of her apple pie.

Someone shook his shoulder. Aunt Edna and her apple pie disappeared. "James, wake up. James!" It was Glennall.

James opened his eyes. Bright sunshine poured into the wagon. And he was not standing up but was stretched out on the floor. "What happened?" he asked, sitting up quickly. The wagon was half empty. The other prisoners were filing out the door.

"We're at the mining camp."

James got out of the wagon and felt his heart sink. The camp was a collection of run-down shacks sitting on a clearing of dirt.

"Line forms to the right," a guard bellowed repeatedly. The prisoners' chains were removed at this point, but since they were stiff and sore, James and Glennall still hobbled to the line, which paraded past a long table. There they were given a flea-infested blanket, a crudely made bowl, and directions to the shack that would become their new home. "You *might* find a straw mattress to sleep on, if you get there fast," they were told by a man behind the table.

James and Glennall made their way along the dirt paths, past the armed guards, to their rickety shack. It was a ramshackle construction of rotting wood, with gaps in the planks large enough to allow a small child to crawl through.

"This'll be cozy in the winter," James said as he stepped inside.

A dozen men were already there. Three sat at a wooden table in the middle, playing cards. A rusty stove sat in the

corner, around which several men lay on their mattresses. One mattress was left for James and Glennall to share.

A guard suddenly appeared at the door. “What are you doing?” he shouted at the men playing cards. Quick as a flash, his whip was out, flicking at the men, who scattered. “We don’t like cards in this camp!” he declared. “They make men lazy.”

Some of the men grumbled their apologies as they cowered behind the table.

The guard coiled his whip again. “When the bell rings, you can get your grub at the canteen,” he announced.

“Food?” James asked, his stomach hurting now from four days without it.

The guard snorted. “As close to it as you’ll get in this pit.”

When the bell rang, James and Glennall rushed down to one of three stone buildings in the camp. Inside they joined a line for plates of food, then sat at one of the long tables. The food consisted of some kind of boiled meat, rotting potatoes, and a biscuit infested with weevils.

James bit his tongue to keep from crying.



That night as they tried to go to sleep, Glennall said, “Don’t be discouraged, James. We’ll get out of this.”

“Yeah? What makes you think so?” James asked moodily.

“The Unseen One will get me out of here. And where I go, you’ll go.”

James looked at him skeptically. “Why should the Unseen One get you out of here?”

“To make things right with my brothers.”

“You mean so you can get back at them.”

Glennall pressed his lips together but didn’t speak.

“Why do you think the Unseen One cares about that?” James continued. “Why should He care about us at all?”

“He does. You were not brought here for this. I think you’ve been sent here to be my helper.”

“To help you get revenge? Not me,” James said, shaking his head. Then he frowned. “Besides, what makes you think everything circles around you and your stupid revenge?”

“What do you mean?”

“You think the Unseen One is going to do what you want, and He’s sent me to help you do it. What makes you so arrogant? The world doesn’t spin around you.”

“James,” Glennall said confidently, “for as long as I can remember, I’ve known that the Unseen One has chosen me for something remarkable. I have a purpose, a destiny to fulfill. Meeting you has made me more sure of it than ever.”

“That’s *your* opinion,” James replied. But suddenly he doubted himself. How could he know whether Glennall was right or wrong? “You don’t have to get cocky about it.”

“I know two kids who’re going to get their ears boxed if they don’t go to sleep!” said a harsh voice nearby.

As James fell asleep, he heard someone in the camp play a pipe. The tune was low and mournful.

At sunrise the next morning, a guard arrived and screamed at them to get out of bed, cracking his whip randomly around the cabin. They were all led to the canteen again, where some brown, gravylike slop was thrown on plates in front of them. Afterward, they were taken to another stone building. A group of men called inspectors poked and prodded them to check their physical condition.

“You’re in the mines,” one of them said to Glennall.

Another slapped James hard on the arm, as if he were slapping the rump of a horse. “You’ll do for a runner,” he concluded.

“I don’t know what a runner is, sir,” James replied.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

The room suddenly went quiet as a man entered. He was middle-aged, with a waxen face. He wore a broad-brimmed hat with a large feather sticking out of the side. His coat and breeches were black, offset by a white shirt with lace collar and cuffs. His boots were also black, but they were polished so that the dim light reflected off them. He held a walking stick.

“Who is that?” James whispered.

The inspector who’d slapped his arm replied, “It’s Estburn, the keeper of the camp. He’s boss over us all. Mind your manners with him if you don’t want to be hurt.”

Estburn strolled through the crowd of prisoners, inspecting them as he went. “So you are our newest members,” he said without warmth. “Welcome.”

He paused in front of a tall, lanky man with a thin face, beaklike nose, and stringy gray hair. James recognized him as one of the men who’d been playing cards the day before. “You are Bask,” Estburn said.

The man bowed slightly but spoke with a posh accent and an air of superiority: “I am, Your Eminence.”

“Fell out of the king’s favor, did you? Served him a bad piece of meat?”

“It was all a misunderstanding, which I hope to have resolved very soon.”

“We shall see about that,” Estburn replied. “Meanwhile, you will use your cooking abilities in *our* humble kitchens.”

“Yes, sir.”

Estburn turned his gaze to the man next to Bask. He was an average-sized man, another card player from the day before. His expression was taut and proud. He stood straight and sturdy like an iron bar. Estburn smiled at him. “Chalcer.”

The man bowed stiffly.

“The king must have been in a bad mood that week, to send us his prized chef *and* the head of the palace police.”

“I have been unjustly accused by my enemies,” Chalcer said.

“Isn’t it always the case?” Estburn said in a mocking tone.

“Where may I best serve the master of this camp?” Chalcer asked politely.

“A man of your strength and determination will serve us best in the deepest part of the mine.”

Chalcer frowned.

“Unless you have a complaint about our choice for you?”

Chalcer bowed again. “I am here to do your bidding.”

Estburn leaned close to him. “And you will, my friend, I assure you.” He continued through the crowd of prisoners, stopping in front of James and Glennall. He eyed Glennall from head to foot, then turned to James. His expression registered the same surprise James had seen on the faces of others who’d looked at him. “Well, well. You’re a treat,” he said.

"Sir?"

"Eyes of two different shades. How unusual." He beckoned the inspector who'd slapped James's arm and asked, "What will you do with him?"

"Runner, sir," the man replied.

"Hmm, yes. That'll do for now. Though we may have other uses as time goes by."

"As you wish, sir," the man said.

Estburn walked on. He didn't stop to speak to anyone else, but James thought he saw him exchange a quick glance with another prisoner: a short, thin man with narrow eyes and deep wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. There was something knowing about the look they exchanged, but James had no idea what it meant. He recognized the man as the third card player from the day before.

Mining tools—a pickax and a bucket—were distributed to most of the prisoners, Glennall included. Since James was a runner, he was given only a leather cap with a small lamp in it.

"But what does a runner do?" James asked another inspector.

The man looked at him as if he'd asked a stupid question. "He *runs*, you twit," he stated.

Guards directed them out of the stone building and up the dirt path to the main entrance to the mine. As they walked, the third man approached James and Glennall.

"You're in my cabin," he observed.

"That's correct," Glennall agreed.

"Marutians, I'll wager?"

Glennall looked at the man carefully. "Who wants to know?"

The man smiled. His teeth were crooked and yellow. "I'm Onei. And there's no need to take an attitude with me, boy. I'm only making conversation, I am. We're in the same cabin, so we may as well be friendly. Truth is, I may be the best friend you'll ever have in this camp."

Glennall offered only, "I'm Glennall."

The man nodded, as if grateful to have been informed. "I'll bet you get a lot of comments about your eyes," he then said to James.

"A few," James replied. He felt uneasy about the man, as if talking to him might cause them trouble.

“I’ve heard stories about people with eyes like yours. You’re supposed to know magic.”

James glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “If I knew magic, do you think I’d be *here?* I’d cast a magic spell and get out.”

The man showed his teeth. “That’s true, I guess. You’re a clever boy,” he concluded, and then he scurried off to talk to some other prisoner.

James and Glennall looked at each other and shrugged.

“I’d be careful of that one,” Chalcer said from behind them. “He’s not to be trusted.”

“How do you know?” Glennall asked.

“For one thing, he cheats at cards.”

They were soon at the mouth of the entrance tunnel. A large shack stood off to one side, and on the other side were three hoists with cages attached to heavy ropes. James saw groups of miners get into the cages, which were then lowered into the main vertical shaft by three men at three different wheels. They turned the wheel one direction to lower the cages, then reversed it to bring them back up. Sometimes they let the miners in, and other times they brought the coal out in buckets and wheelbarrows. The ropes were marked to indicate the lengths needed to reach the different levels of the mine.

“Miner?” a guard asked Glennall.

He held up his pickax and bucket and nodded.

“Get in,” the guard said.

Glennall squeezed into the cage with other miners. Slowly it descended out of James’s sight. He watched the rope as it went—taut and strained—and shivered. It looked unsafe.

The guard shouted at James, “What’s your purpose in life?”

“I’m a runner,” James answered.

The guard hooked a thumb in the direction of the shack beside the tunnel. James walked over to a stocky man with a shaved head and scars on his forehead.

“A runner, eh?” he said after James explained why he was there.

“Yes, sir, but I don’t know what a runner does.”

“Simple. You run things into the shafts for me. If a miner needs a new pickax, you run it down. If a miner needs a new candle for his cap, you run *it* down. And when you’re not running down, you’re running back up, bringing me reports

on their work and samples of the ore they find. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

The man then handed James a box of candlewicks and ordered, "First job today, take these to level four, shaft three. And be quick about it. I don't tolerate laziness."

"Level four, shaft three," James repeated, hoping it would make sense. He went over, got into one of the cages, and felt his stomach jolt as it was lowered into the ground. It shimmied and shook unsteadily, and he wondered how sturdy the cages themselves were, not to mention the ropes that lifted and lowered them.

The cage stopped at level one, and three men got off. Then it lowered to level two, and two men got off. No one got off at level three. James was the only one to get off at level four.

"How many levels are there?" he asked one man who had a nasty cough.

"Seventeen."

"But that's like drilling into the center of the earth," James observed.

The man coughed and glared at him.

Level four was a short tunnel that almost immediately branched into three separate tunnels. One went straight, the second off to the left, and the third to the right. It was dark except for small oil lamps that dotted the walls. A crude sign indicated that shaft three was to the right. James wondered where Glennall was working.

Still clutching the box of wicks, James followed the tunnel around to the right. He heard voices ahead, some coughing, an occasional shout, but mostly the steady sound of pickaxes hitting the rock. The air was thick with coal dust. He found it hard to breathe.

A figure stepped out of the shadows in front of him, as if it had been part of the wall and suddenly came loose. It grabbed him and spun him around. The box fell to the ground. Then he was slammed against the side of the tunnel.

"Hey!" James cried out. While one arm held him by the neck, pressing his face into the black rock, he felt a second hand nimbly search his pockets.

"What's this?" the figure asked. It had pulled the photo of James's family out of a back pocket.

James thought he knew the voice. "Onei?" he guessed.

"Shut up," Onei said. "What do you call this thing?"

"It's a picture."

"It doesn't look like any picture I ever saw. They don't make paintings this small."

"It's a *photograph*," James explained, then struggled against the arm. "Let go of me."

"Stay still or I'll hurt you." Onei's hand now ran over James's back and chest. It stopped on the ring James still had tied on a string around his neck. "Oh? And what's this?"

Panicked that Onei might take his father's ring, James quickly put one foot against the wall and pushed back with all his might. The strength of his thrust caused him and Onei to fall backward into the tunnel with James landing on top. James quickly got to his feet. Onei stayed on the floor, clutching his stomach.

"I think you . . . winded me," he gasped.

"What's the idea of frisking me?" James demanded.

Onei moved into a sitting position and tried to get his breath. "I'm doing . . . what I was told."

"Oh yeah? Who told you?"

"Estburn. He wanted me to find out about you and the other one."

"All you had to do was ask."

"I *did* ask, but you two couldn't be bothered to talk."

James spied his photo lying on the ground between them. Watchful of Onei, he stepped forward and snatched it up. "What do you want from me?" he demanded.

"Estburn wants to know what you two are doing here."

"We're prisoners."

"He doesn't believe it."

"We're here, aren't we?"

"But *why* are you here?"

James looked suspiciously at Onei. "Shouldn't he know already?"

"No. You were sent here without any papers. Rumor has it that you were connected to the head of the security forces, Alexx."

"We were slaves in his house."

"Estburn thinks you've been sent here to spy on him. He thinks Alexx is checking up on him, wants to do him harm."

"We were accused of stealing from Alexx—that's why we're here. His wife set us up because we found out about her

gambling." James picked up the box of wicks. "There. Now you know."

"I'll take the wicks," Onei said as he slowly got to his feet.

"But I have to deliver them to—"

"*Me*. I'm the one you're bringing them to. I arranged it so we could have this little chat." Onei took the box of wicks from James. "You're a feisty devil. But you want to be careful. Friends are hard to find in a place like this."

James stepped aside so that Onei could pass.

"And if I were you," Onei added, "I'd find a better hiding place for that ring. If it has any value, someone'll kill you for it."

The rest of the day, James exhausted himself running in and out of the various tunnels and mine shafts. A bell rang for the men to take a 15-minute break for lunch; then it rang again to send them back to work. The same bell rang several hours later to signal the prisoners to end their work. Another bell would ring shortly to beckon them to the canteen for supper. James waited by the cages for Glennall to come up. It felt like the end of the first day of school.

Glennall eventually stepped out of one of the cages, barely resembling the boy who had gone down in the morning. His face and clothes were covered with black coal dust and streaked with sweat. He walked slowly, stiffly, coughing sporadically. But he didn't complain. He didn't even speak until they were almost back at the cabin.

"Now I see what I never saw before," he said grimly.

"See what?" James asked.

"This is how we treat the workers and slaves in my father's mines." His eyes were red-rimmed. "Once the Unseen One has made things right with my brothers, I will change things at home. No one should spend another day like this, let alone a lifetime."

James wondered if Glennall's attitude was to be admired or pitied. *If we get out of here,* then *he should be admired*, James concluded. *But if we're trapped here for good, I feel sorry for him.*

As they approached the cabin, they heard shouts coming from inside. Stepping through the door, they took in the scene immediately: Chalcer stood in front of Onei, his fist raised up to the man's face. "You stay away from me, and you

stay away from my things!" he threatened.

Onei spread his arms. "I don't know what you're talking about," he insisted.

"You're either a thief or a spy for Estburn. I don't care which it is, but you'd better stay clear of me!"

"You're out of your mind."

Chalcer grabbed Onei's shirt with both hands and pulled him close. "Stay clear!" he hissed in Onei's face. Then he thrust him away.

Onei staggered and kept his balance only by grabbing the wooden table. He looked around at the circle of faces gazing on him in silence. Embarrassed, he pushed through the wall of men and stomped out the door.

"Was that wise?" Bask asked Chalcer calmly.

Chalcer dropped onto a chair and began to take off his boots. "I won't put up with it," he said indignantly.

"But if he's working for Estburn, you may wind up in trouble."

"Estburn had better kill me then. If I suffer because of that little rat, he'll suffer, too. I'm as good as dead if the king leaves me in this camp anyway. I have nothing to lose." He wiped a dirty sleeve across his dirty brow. It smeared the coal dust with more coal dust.

James thought about telling them what had happened with Onei in the mine, but he decided not to. It was his first day in the camp, and he didn't know whose side he should be on.

"I agree," Glennall said after James had told him his thinking. They had gone to a large collection of troughs in the center of the camp where the prisoners could wash up. The water was filthy and cold. "Onei makes my skin crawl, but there's no point in making Estburn angry."

James splashed the water on his face and arms. He couldn't tell whether it made any difference.

Glennall continued as he wiped a rag over his body, "Estburn may be useful to us."

James stifled a laugh before responding, "I think you've been breathing too much coal dust. We're *slaves* in this camp, and you talk about Estburn like he's going to serve *us* somehow."

"He might."

"And pigs might fly."

“Stranger things have happened,” Glennall said earnestly.



“Uh-oh,” James said.

Two guards had come to the canteen door. Their eyes searched the room, filled with prisoners eating their gruel, until their gaze fell on Chalcer.

“I knew it,” Bask said despondently as they approached down the aisle between the long tables.

Chalcer looked up from his plate at the two gorillalike men who positioned themselves on both sides of him. “Don’t I get to finish this delicious dinner?” he asked glibly.

The two guards grabbed his arms and dragged him from the canteen.

“What will they do to him?” James asked.

Bask shrugged and replied, “Beat him, whip him—I’m new here myself, so I don’t know. But I knew it would happen this way. Didn’t I tell him?”

Across the room, Onei finished his meal without ever looking up.



The two moons were framed by the open window on the side of the cabin. James lay next to Glennall on their shared mattress. Glennall’s breathing had settled into the steady rhythm of someone in a deep sleep. In other parts of the cabin, people snored. Everyone was exhausted.

James was exhausted too, but he couldn’t sleep. His mind retraced the events that had taken him from being an orphan at Aunt Edna’s to being a prisoner in a mine. He wished now that he was back there with the old woman. *She isn’t really as bad as I’ve made her out to be,* he thought. *All she wanted me to do was behave myself, study my lessons, and go to*

church with her. Was that so awful? Probably not. But at the time, it seemed like the worst life in the world. Now, lying on a damp, flea-infested mattress in a slave camp, things sure look different.

Aunt Edna was a deeply religious woman. James suspected that she prayed morning, noon, and night, if not all the time. Now he wondered what she would think about all the dreams and visions and the legends of the Unseen One. Would she believe them? Probably, which might be one reason he was so resistant to them. His mother and father had rejected everything to do with the church. They were "rationalists," they said. Life and the world could be explained within the realms of science and nature. God was no longer needed, and faith was a waste of time.

James felt a ball of emotion rise in his throat as he thought about his parents. He missed them terribly. But he also began to think they had been wrong. There was nothing scientific or natural about what had happened to him. He had suddenly shifted from one world to another, the color of his eyes had changed, and now he seemed to have this strange, special ability to have visions about things that would happen.

Glennall had said it was because of the Unseen One. He'd said James was there to fulfill some kind of purpose. But *what* purpose? To help Glennall? If that were true, why didn't the Unseen One just come out and tell him what he was supposed to do?

Aunt Edna always said that "God works in mysterious ways." So if the Unseen One was like the God of his world—or was in fact the same God—then maybe He also worked in mysterious ways. Through dreams and visions?

Glennall was convinced the Unseen One would get him out of the camp so he could get even with his brothers for what they'd done. It put a fire of hope in his eyes, a determination on his face, that few of the other prisoners had. But James wavered. Glennall might be right, or he might be completely wrong. Did the Unseen One help some people so they could get revenge on other people? Did God?

Aunt Edna had once said that God was love and justice all wrapped up in one. James had dismissed the idea. "It doesn't make sense," he'd told her. "Love is one thing, and justice is another. How can love and justice be wrapped up together like that?"

"That's the mystery of *grace*," she had replied. And then

she had smiled at him in that pinched way she had.

James felt his legs twitch. He wished he could fall asleep. As quietly as possible, he stood up and walked to the window. It was a beautiful night. The two moons bathed everything in pale, orange-tinted light. The camp looked so clear and quiet. Somewhere a dog barked.

Would he get in trouble if he took a walk? A walk might help him sleep, and if he slept, he would be a better worker tomorrow. That's what he thought. So he climbed out the window, his bare feet landing on the dirt and rocks below. He winced from the pain he expected to feel. But there was no pain. His feet felt as if they were hardly touching the ground.

James strolled between the shacks and out into the open. A guard, musket at the ready, approached him. He opened his mouth to speak, to explain why he wasn't in bed, but the guard passed by without seeing him.

Am I a ghost? James wondered.

He continued to stroll through the camp, past one of the stone buildings where, through a window, he saw Chalcer slumped forward in a chair. His hands were tied behind his back. He'd been beaten. A trickle of blood slipped from his mouth. The side of his face was purple and swollen.

But James didn't want to dwell there. He wanted to go up to the mine.

One of the guard dogs ran past him, unaware that he was walking where he shouldn't have been. The mouth of the mine gaped at him. It reminded him of the dream he'd had when he first saw Glennall.

Then the thought dawned on him: *This is a dream.* That explained why his bare feet didn't hurt, and the guard and the dog hadn't seen him—and why he was determined to go up to the mine for no reason at all.

The tunnel seemed to glow with the yellow of the candles and lamps. The cages were open and waiting. James thought he should get on, but he stopped, feeling as if someone had put a hand on his shoulder. He then realized he was no longer up top, near the tunnel opening, but was standing by one of the cages on a lower level.

A shadow moved in one of the cages. James couldn't see the face, but it was definitely a man. The shadow turned to look at him. The cage lowered, then stopped. Suddenly the rope slipped, and James heard a loud, wrenching noise. In a

panic, the shadow reached out to him. Then the rope holding the cage snapped. The cage instantly disappeared from view, crashing away deep into the shaft, a man screaming horribly the whole way down. And then . . .

James sat up.

"Dreaming?" Bask asked, sitting at the wooden table in the shack, pulling on his boots. Morning light filled the room.

James nodded his head. He had fallen asleep after all.

Bask grunted. "I think your friend had a nightmare too. He just raced out of here like he had the devil on his tail."

James looked down at the mattress. Glennall was gone. Dressing as quickly as he could, James left the shack and headed for the canteen. He had to talk to Glennall about that dream. If what they thought was true, Glennall might have had the same dream *and* might even have seen what James couldn't: *who* was in the cage when it fell.

Glennall stood at the door of the canteen, a worried expression on his face. "It didn't happen," he told James even before James spoke.

"What?"

"The dream," he said, his eyes still searching the crowd. "I came running down here expecting to hear that somebody had been killed last night, but nobody was. That means that whatever we saw hasn't happened yet, but it *will.* I only wish I knew *how.*"

"Didn't you see it in the dream?"

"No."

"A rope on one of the cages snapped."

Glennall nodded and stared at the ground. "So you saw one part of the dream and I saw the other."

"I couldn't see who was in the cage. Could you?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

At that moment, Onei ambled up to them. "You two should go inside and get your breakfast while it's hot," he suggested.

Glennall's face went pale.

Onei didn't seem to notice but added quietly, "Estburn wants to see you two in his office after the work bell rings tonight."

"He wants to see *us?"* James inquired, not sure he'd heard right.

“Stay away from the cages today,” Glennall whispered to Onei as if he hadn’t heard what was just said.

“What?” Onei asked.

“Don’t go in the cages.”

Onei glared at Glennall, then laughed. “I have to go in the cages. How am I going to work otherwise?”

“You’ll be killed,” Glennall said.

Onei blinked at him as if he couldn’t comprehend what Glennall was saying. Then he said, “You playing games? I don’t have time for games,” and walked into the canteen.

Just then, James saw Chalcer walk past. His gait was stooped, and he moved his legs as if he had a great weight on them. The side of his face was swollen and purple, just like in the dream. He stopped where he was and looked in their direction. But he wasn’t interested in James or Glennall. He was staring beyond them, gazing with hatred at Onei.



It began to rain while the prisoners walked up to the mine. When they arrived at the mouth of the tunnel, James was told by the man with the scars on his forehead that he wasn’t needed for running. He was then given a pickax to help dig in the mines.

“Level two,” the man said.

“That’s my level,” Glennall said happily.

The cages seemed to be operating as usual, lowering and lifting as they took the prisoners to their work. Still, James felt sick to his stomach as he got on.

“It wasn’t us in the dream,” Glennall reminded him.

When they reached level two, James nearly leaped off, relieved to have solid ground beneath his feet again.

An hour after they started digging, James was coughing uncontrollably. Black dust filled the air, blew in his face, and coated his lungs. Sweat dripped and stung his eyes. He glanced over at Glennall, who was also bathed in sweat but wore that expression James now knew so well: a look of clenched teeth and nerve. He would not complain. He would not show his pain or suffering.

Glennall turned to him and said, “Evil intentions, good consequences. The Unseen One will see to that.”

And James remembered that that was exactly how it happened in the vision they’d seen when they both tried to stop Sedras from falling.

“Take my hands,” James said abruptly as he put down his pickax.

Glennall looked around quickly to make sure a guard wasn’t near. To stop working would usually result in a sharp whip across the back or a club on the head.

“Come on,” James persisted.

“You know it doesn’t always work.”

“I know, but I want to try.” His heart was pounding hard. “I want to believe the way you do, *hope* the way you hope.”

“You should believe even if we don’t see anything.”

“Maybe I will,” James responded, but he kept his hands held out. “Take my hands anyway.”

They grabbed hands.

Instantly the mine disappeared, and James and Glennall stood in a great crowd of people. Their arms reached out to Glennall, their faces yearning. At first James thought they were thronging around him in adoration, applauding him for some reason. But then he realized they were begging, beseeching him to help. Their faces were thin, their cheekbones prominent, their eyes sunken. They were starving. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands.

Then, just as suddenly, the crowd was gone and the boys were back in the mine again.

The two looked helplessly at each other.

“It will get worse before it gets better,” Glennall said simply.

Just then, a guard shouted at them from farther down the shaft, “Boy!”

James and Glennall both turned.

“Not you,” he said to Glennall, “I’m talking to the runner.”

“Yes, sir?” James responded.

“You’re wanted topside to do some more running. Lucky you.”

“Yes, sir,” James replied and started away.

As he went, James heard the guard tell Glennall,

“Which means *you’ll* have to work twice as hard.”

“Lucky me,” Glennall said with a sigh.

Navigating his way through the mine, James reached the cage just as it was arriving from the upper level. His chest suddenly felt tight as he saw a figure standing in the shadows of the cage.

“I’m going down,” Onei said, stepping into a spot of light. “Use the other cage.”

James’s lips began to move, but his tongue felt numb. He wanted to shout for Onei to get out of the cage *right now*. All he could manage was a stammer. “Get off,” he said. “My dream . . .”

Onei looked surprised, then seemed to remember his conversation with Glennall that morning. “Don’t try to spook me again,” he said with the smile of one who wouldn’t be suckered by a prank.

“No!” James said as the cage started to move down.

The cage stopped for a second, then slipped three or four feet.

“Something’s wrong,” Onei said, his face a confused blend of that same smile and now worry.

James moved toward the cage. “Get out! Hurry!”

Onei took a step for the door to climb out. It was too late. The cage suddenly dropped, disappearing into the hole, free-falling downward.

Onei’s scream echoed through every shaft and tunnel until it was cut off by the sickening crash of wrenched, splintered wood at the bottom.

James slumped against the cave wall, oblivious to the men who came rushing from the different shafts. He cupped a hand over his mouth to keep from vomiting.

Glennall was at his side. “Onei?” he asked, already knowing.

James nodded, squeezing his eyes shut. He tried to block out that final expression on Onei’s face before the cage fell. But it stayed with him for a long time after.



The camp inspectors have told me the rope had worn out. It was frayed, and it broke," Estburn said to James and Glennall. They were in his office, having gone there directly when the bell rang for the workday to end. The rumor throughout the camp was that Chalcer had taken his revenge on Onei for the beating Estburn had given him.

Estburn lived and worked in the third stone building, the smallest of the three. It was a strange mixture of stone and wood that reminded James of a hunting lodge he had once seen in a magazine. Estburn stood before the two boys in an outfit of purple—purple jacket, purple breeches. His shirt had a lace collar and sleeves, also embroidered in purple. A purple hat with a white feather sat on his desk.

James and Glennall sat on two wooden chairs, their hands in their laps. Glennall had instructed James before coming in that they must always appear respectful and *never* look Estburn in the eye. A man like him might consider it a challenge to his power and have them whipped.

"Enough about the unfortunate accident," Estburn said. "I will miss old Onei. But, like everyone in this camp, he can be replaced. I'm interested in the two of you mostly."

"How may we serve you, sir?" Glennall asked.

"By answering my questions honestly," he replied. He walked around the desk and sat down in his chair. James stole a glance at him. Without his hat, his head looked small. His brown hair was thinning, and his pink scalp peeked through in patches. His eyes were greenish and narrow, set beneath a heavy brow. His nose was puglike, and his lips were two slivers of pink set between thick jowls. He would have been comical if he hadn't had so much power to be cruel. "Tell me about yourselves," he instructed once he was comfortably

seated.

James waited for Glennall to speak, but he didn't.

After a few awkward moments, Estburn continued, "I'll make it easy for you. I know that the two of you are not Palatians and that you're here because you tried to steal from Alexx, the head of the king's security forces."

"We didn't steal anything, sir," James said defensively.

Estburn smiled. "I'd be quite happy if you stole from Alexx. There's no love lost between us."

James looked up in surprise.

Estburn chuckled. "That's right. You may both look up. I don't think much of cowering."

Glennall slowly raised his head.

"As I was saying," Estburn went on, "Alexx is no friend of mine. He was responsible for giving me this position as keeper of the prison camp."

James wondered why Estburn was telling them all this. He worried when adults told their youngers too much about themselves; it usually meant they wanted something.

Estburn added silkily, "I never cared for Alexx's wife, either. What was her name? Sedras, that's right. A woman not to be trusted."

James and Glennall didn't acknowledge or deny the comment.

"I understand you were both very helpful to Alexx for a time. What did you do for him?"

"We helped him with his accounts," Glennall replied.

"How?"

Glennall explained about how he had invested Alexx's money, managed his accounts, and kept his house in good financial order.

When Glennall had finished, Estburn said, "I'm impressed that someone your age was so resourceful. Can you help me in the same way you helped Alexx?"

Glennall was confused. "In what way, sir?"

"The king requires camps like this to be profitable for him. He wants the workers to be productive for his kingdom, generating a lot of coal and ore not only for Palatia but also to export to other countries. I would like to impress His Majesty, if possible."

"We will be pleased to help in any way we can," said Glennall.

Estburn clapped his hands together. “Excellent! You may spend tonight drawing up a plan for me.”

“Tonight?” James asked. He knew Glennall was exhausted from his day’s work, and so was he.

“Tonight,” Estburn affirmed. “If I like what you propose, you may not have to go to the mine tomorrow. If, however, you produce a lot of rubbish, I’ll have you beaten *and* sent back to the mine. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” the boys replied in unison.

“And if I catch you stealing from me, you won’t live to regret it. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Estburn left them. The instant the door was closed, Glennall was on his feet and pacing quickly.

“What are we going to do?” James asked, worried.

“We’re going to come up with a plan,” Glennall replied. “Get a pen, ink, and paper ready, James. You’ll be my scribe.”

James obeyed. And for the next six hours, they discussed and argued ways to make Estburn’s mine a profitable enterprise. For the most part, Glennall modeled the plan on how his family had revived a failing mine on their property. Step one was to find new sources of ore. Step two was to find more efficient ways to get the ore out of the ground.

“Those cages have to be replaced,” Glennall said.

James thought of the silent Western movies he’d seen and did his best to explain how the coal was brought out of the mines in them. He scribbled drawings of railway tracks and carts. Glennall thought James was a genius and decided they could build tracks on every level, leading to a shaft with one of the cages that would be used only for hauling coal to the surface.

Step three was to figure out how to change the prisoners from slaves to workers.

“He’ll never accept that,” James interjected.

“We’ll try anyway,” Glennall said. “Everyone will work harder if they know they have a *reward* waiting for them at the end instead of a whip—or death.”

“What kind of reward? Everybody around here wants freedom.”

“Maybe freedom for some, maybe better accommodations for others. Maybe we should devise a system

of payment, a way for the workers to put wages away for the day they're released." Glennall's eyes were bright with enthusiasm. "There are dozens of things we can do!"

They filled several pages with ideas.

By the time they finished their plan, the clock on the wall showed two o'clock in the morning. Numb from exhaustion, they stepped out of the office door to falling rain and a sleeping camp. A guard waved a musket in their direction. "I'd better escort you or you'll get shot," he said.

They trudged through the darkness and the mud to their shack. Then they stepped inside and watched the guard walk away. The room seemed unusually still. James noticed that no one was snoring. Was it empty?

Suddenly he was grabbed. Hands seemed to come from all directions, pulling him one way and another, then down onto the floor. Someone lit a lamp, and James saw he was surrounded by the men who shared the cabin. Glennall was also pinned to the ground.

"What's the big idea?" James cried out.

"Be quiet!" a voice said.

"Where have you been?" another voice asked. It was Bask.

"Shut up, all of you," a third voice chimed in. This one belonged to Chalcer. "Light another lamp, but keep it dim."

Flint was struck and another lamp lit.

"Bring them to the table," Chalcer commanded.

The two boys were carried to the table and dropped into two of the chairs.

"What's the meaning of this?" Glennall asked.

"That's what *we* want to know," Chalcer said. "You go off to see Estburn, and what do we think? You're being beaten for something. Instead, though, you return to us at two in the morning without a scratch on you. What have you been doing, reporting to him about us? Are you his new spies now that Onei is dead?"

"It's none of your business," Glennall spat.

Chalcer slapped him and commanded, "Try again!"

Glennall stubbornly tightened his lips. He wasn't going to answer. Chalcer raised his hand again.

James quickly said, "We weren't spying!"

"Then what were you doing?" Bask chimed in. "Wining and dining with him?"

“No, we were—”

“Don’t speak!” Glennall interrupted firmly. “It’s none of their business. If they want to hurt us, they’ll have to answer to Estburn.”

Chalcer was unimpressed. “You two want to go the way of Onei?” he threatened. “Is that what you want?”

“Kill us and you’ll be killing any hope for this camp,” Glennall said coolly.

“What does that mean?” Bask asked.

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

Chalcer growled, “I’ll get it out of you!” He grabbed James’s left hand and Glennall’s right. He was going to twist their wrists, expecting that the pain would make them talk. But instead, he froze where he was, his face suddenly going hard as if he’d had a great shock.

James and Glennall knew why, for in that moment, they saw what Chalcer saw in his mind.

Chalcer stood in fine robes of state made of thick purple velvet. A man whom James had seen only in paintings at the house of Alexx and around the shops of Muirk stood before Chalcer; he wore a royal robe of white. It was King Akvych. A gold circlet sat on his close-cut white hair. His face was clean-shaved and had the stern expression of a man who knew power well. He held his hands over Chalcer—as if in a blessing of some sort—and announced to the gathering that Chalcer had been exonerated after being falsely accused and was now restored to his rank as the chief of palace security. The crowd around them applauded. Then the clapping and the picture itself faded away. They were all once again in the flickering shadow of lamplight.

Chalcer stared at the two boys with an expression of fear. He let go of their wrists. “What kind of magic was that?” he demanded.

Glennall didn’t answer. He only smiled confidently.

“What happened?” Bask asked. The rest of the men whispered anxiously to one another.

Chalcer kept his eyes on the two boys. “I’ve heard whispers about you two,” he said in amazement. “You told Onei he was going to die—you said you’d seen it in a dream.”

“It’s true,” Glennall replied.

It might have been James’s imagination, but he thought everyone except Chalcer suddenly took a step back from

them.

"Then explain to me what we just saw," Chalcer instructed.

"I think it's obvious what we saw," Glennall offered. "You will be returned to the king and restored to your former position."

Chalcer's face seemed to soften from relief. "When?"

James remembered something. In the scene, Chalcer had had a healing scratch on his forehead, up near his hairline. The scratch was visible on Chalcer's forehead now. "You'll go back to the king before that scratch heals," James said.

Glennall looked at James, clearly impressed.

Abruptly, Chalcer turned to the men in the shack. "Put out that light," he ordered. "Go to bed."

"But what about these two?" Bask demanded. "What about their connivings with Estburn?"

"Forget about it." Chalcer went back to his bed.

Bask and the rest lingered for a minute as if waiting for someone else to take charge. No one did. Then the lamp was put out, and everyone returned to bed.

James noticed two things the next morning. First, Chalcer seemed nicer to James and Glennall than he'd ever been before. He said "Good morning" to them and even offered to let them use some of his toothpaste, an expensive commodity in that place. Second, Bask seemed to linger near him and Glennall as they prepared for the day. Bask was normally up early to help cook the breakfast at the canteen, but this morning he moved slower, with a forced casual air. Only after everyone else had left, and James and Glennall were about to leave the shack themselves did he approach them.

"I want to know what's going to happen to me," he said abruptly.

"We're not fortune-tellers," Glennall explained.

"But I saw what happened to Chalcer last night," he persisted. "He's not easily impressed by anything. But the look on his face . . ."

"It's not within our control."

Bask licked his upper lip. James noticed there were beads of sweat on it. "I've been having terrible dreams lately," Bask said nervously. "I want to know what will happen to

me."

James raised an eyebrow to Glennall, who shrugged.

Bask's mouth twitched into a smile. He held out his hands to the two boys. "Come on."

"This is not our doing," Glennall said as he took Bask's left hand. "It's up to the Unseen One to reveal or not reveal."

James took Bask's right hand and immediately wished that he hadn't.

The room was filled with the stench of decay. They weren't in the shack anymore, however, but in a dungeon somewhere. The walls were slick and mossy, dripping foul water. Somewhere overhead was a dim light. It was like looking up a tunnel. Iron bars crossed a rectangular hole in the ceiling.

They heard a rhythmic creaking sound. James turned in its direction and saw Glennall standing next to him. Glennall looked ill, as if he'd seen something that had made him sick. The creaking continued, steady, swaying. It reminded James of the time his father had tied an old tire to a tree branch for the children to swing on. When they did, it creaked in the same way. It was the knot of rope rubbing against itself and the wood.

James looked beyond Glennall in the direction of the creaking sound. There he saw a man's body tied by the neck to a scaffold. The body swung slowly. The dead eyes bulged, and the tongue hung out. It was Bask.

"No!" Bask cried as he pulled his hands away from the boys. He looked at them angrily, a fury in his voice when he finally spoke again. "You are charlatans! You're playing tricks with my mind! The king would not execute *me*." He spat at them. "You're worse than fortune-tellers. Stay away from me, you frauds!"

He left them in a rage.

"It's not our fault," James said to Glennall as they walked to the canteen.

Glennall sighed. "No, it isn't," he agreed. "But few people see it that way."

A guard intercepted them before they reached the canteen door. "The boss wants to see you," he informed them.

James felt queasy as they approached Estburn's office. What if their night's work didn't meet with his approval? What if he hated their ideas and beat them severely, as he had

promised?

The guard opened the door to the office. “Go in,” he ordered.

James was surprised to see both Chalcer and Bask waiting in the office as well.

“Well, well,” Chalcer said.

Estburn entered by a side door, one that led from his private apartments in another part of the building, James guessed. Without looking at them, Estburn went to his desk. He didn’t sit but stood looking down at various papers spread out before him. “I have news,” he finally said.

The four of them waited.

He held up a piece of paper. It looked formal, with ornate writing and a splotch of red wax on the upper right-hand corner. James would learn later that the wax was the king’s seal. “Miracle of miracles,” Estburn said, looking up at Chalcer. “You are to be released to go back to the palace.”

Chalcer clicked his heels together and gave a slight bow in acknowledgment.

Estburn then picked up a second piece of paper that looked like the first. “Bask, you’re being called back to the palace too,” he continued.

“I knew it! The king has given me a reprieve!” Bask said happily, clapping his hands together. He sneered quickly at James and Glennall. “So much for your dreams.”

Estburn smiled. “Actually, the king seems to have decided that you were in on a plot to poison him. He has received signed confessions from three of your staff, two of whom are now dead by hanging. His Majesty has decided to execute you as well.”

Bask’s face went ashen. His mouth fell open in stunned surprise. “No!”

“Normally we would have obliged the king by executing you here, but His Majesty insists that you be hung in the royal dungeon.” Estburn spoke as if he was describing a minor inconvenience.

Bask began to weep. “No, please, it’s a mistake!” he cried.

At some signal James didn’t detect, two guards entered and grabbed Bask’s arms.

He resisted, but without effect. They dragged him from the room. “No!” he cried. “Please! It’s a terrible mistake! I

would never try to poison the king! I wouldn't!" He shouted similar things until his voice echoed in the open air outside, then faded, then suddenly stopped. James never saw him again.

"The king bids you to go immediately," Estburn said to Chalcer.

Chalcer nodded and moved toward the door.

"No hard feelings, I hope," Estburn said in a friendly way just before Chalcer left.

Chalcer didn't reply but turned to gaze at him with a deliberate and studied expression. After a few seconds, he faced James and Glennall. "I will not forget the two of you when I am back in the palace," he said. And then he was gone.

Estburn cleared his throat.

It's our turn, James thought. *One bit of good news, one bit of bad news. Which will it be for us?*

"I'm intrigued by the plans you've drawn up," Estburn said, abruptly sitting down and riffling through the papers they had left for him.

James shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

Estburn glanced up. "Oh, don't be nervous. I want you to sit down so we can discuss what you've written. Some of these ideas are rather foreign, even radical. But they appeal to me. Sit down so we can talk."

James and Glennall pulled up the two visitors' chairs. Once again a signal was given that James didn't see, and a guard entered through the apartment door. He carried a tray bearing three plates of breakfast—not the gruel from the canteen but a real breakfast of eggs, bacon, ham, potatoes, and toast.

"I want you well fed," Estburn said simply when he saw the smiles on the boys' faces. "I want your minds *sharp* for the work you have to do."



Somewhere outside the perimeter of the camp, spring turned to summer and touched the trees with green; the flowers with white, purple, yellow, and red; and the air with warmth and bird song. Inside the camp, it grew noticeably warmer. But the ground remained barren and muddy from the workers' boots. Inside the mines, the dark was still dark, the damp was still damp, and the coal dust still covered and choked the men.

Thanks to Glennall and James, other things changed. Their plan to make the penal colony a profitable enterprise took shape. Estburn got all the credit for their ideas, of course, but he was smart enough to reward the boys as well. He took them out of the shack and put them in a corner apartment of his stone house. It wasn't luxurious by any means, but it was better than they'd had: two honest-to-goodness beds, a washstand, a small potbellied stove, two writing desks, and a cupboard for the various papers and files they needed to do their work.

As had happened at Alexx's house, Glennall became the staff accountant. He pored over columns of numbers, watching over the stocks and supplies, expenses and income. He haggled with outside investors and carefully negotiated contracts to sell the camp's coal not only to the Palatians but also to Marutians.

"I'm in competition with my own family," he said with a laugh from his desk one day.

"What do you mean?" James asked.

"We're both trying to secure business with the Albanites." He was amused by the thought for days, but James knew he wasn't really happy. He had that look in his eye—the look of revenge.

James's role was to represent the workers. He met with them regularly to discuss their problems and difficulties, their needs and wants, and then report back to Glennall and Estburn. This gave him particular pleasure for two reasons. First, his father had once been a representative for factory workers near their home in Pittsburgh, back when the unions had power, before the Depression started. Second, the slaves began to feel less like slaves and more like regular workers. James argued hard to get more sensible working hours, the shacks repaired, new mattresses brought in, healthier food in the canteen, proper plumbing and sanitation, and safer conditions in the mine. He used every idea he'd ever heard his father mention at the dinner table when recounting to his mother what had happened at the factory that day.

As long as Glennall could make it work financially, Estburn didn't seem to care. He was content to sit and enjoy the profits.

Summer came so gently that James hardly noticed the increase in temperature, the mugginess of the days, or how the men had stripped down to their undershirts to do their work.

One day late in June, a young man knocked on the door of the boys' apartment, then came in. It was Barric, a servant of Estburn's whom James and Glennall had befriended. Not only was he good company, but he often brought them the latest rumors from Estburn's office as well. Of more importance, James and Glennall found him invaluable for helping them to navigate around Estburn's various moods.

On this June day, Barric stood before them with his hands clasped in front of his gray apron—he'd obviously just come from Estburn's kitchen—and a smile stretched across his handsome face. His brown eyes sparkled.

Glennall was sitting at the desk, doing sums on a page of inventory, and hardly noticed Barric at all. James eyed their friend from his own desk, where he was working on a crude drawing of the mine, trying to devise a better means of getting the coal out.

"What are you smiling at?" James asked.

"Estburn has been invited to the palace," Barric answered.

Glennall looked up. "He has? Why?"

"The king is having a banquet to reward successful

businessmen in the country. Estburn is going to receive a special award for what he's done with this camp."

"What *he's* done!" James harrumphed.

"None of our ideas would have been carried out if Estburn hadn't approved," Glennall reminded him.

James harrumphed again.

Barric continued to smirk. "Your friend Chalcer is also going to receive an award."

"Oh?"

"Apparently he exposed some spies in the palace who were selling Palatian trade secrets to other countries." Barric paused for the sake of drama, then added, "I heard that your old master was part of it."

"Alexx—a spy?" Glennall said. "I don't believe it."

"It was his wife, actually," Barric explained. "She was selling secrets to help pay for a gambling problem she has."

James and Glennall stole a glance at each other.

Barric continued, "Anyway, Alexx has had to resign in disgrace. His wife will probably be jailed—or executed."

"That's too bad," James said sincerely.

Glennall leaned back in his chair. "I wonder how Chalcer and Estburn will get along. You can be sure Chalcer hasn't forgotten that beating."

"Maybe not, but he seems to have forgotten *us,*" James observed.

"He made no promises to us," said Glennall. "Besides, it isn't as if we did him any favors. All we did was let him see what was about to happen to him."

The banquet at the palace was two weeks away. Estburn pestered Glennall and James the entire time. He wanted to make sure he had all the facts and figures in his head so he could impress the court with his knowledge of the camp's success. He rehearsed his speech in front of them and, fortunately, took their advice to cut it from its original length of 20 minutes down to a polite "thank you" and a brief statement of how grateful he was to the king for the honor.

Finally the day came. Estburn and Barric in their best outfits, two guards, and a driver piled onto the horse-drawn coach and hurried off.

Glennall and James watched them leave, then turned to go back into their apartment. Somewhere in the camp, they could hear fiddles and other kinds of stringed instruments

playing. Men were shouting and dancing. The smells of various barbecues filled the air. In a large, level place, some of the men played their version of what James knew as soccer. These were the sounds and smells of a Sunday, the only day when all the slaves were free to enjoy themselves. That was one of the changes James had made: no more working seven days a week. Though this world didn't seem to understand the idea of a Sabbath or of going to church, James had it fixed in his mind from *his* world that one day should be free of work, and that day should be Sunday.

Some of the men shouted for James and Glennall to join in the sport. "We're short by two!" they called. "Come on!"

"I have work to do," Glennall said.

"Forget your work. Take a day off," James encouraged as he rushed off to join the game.

Glennall glanced toward the apartment, then laughed. "All right," he agreed.

During the afternoon, as they kicked at the ball, raced around the field, and nearly killed themselves trying to score a goal, James was aware of how much they'd both changed. Glennall was no longer the pasty-faced noodle he'd been when they first met in the cave. He was becoming a strong, intelligent, and handsome young man. James didn't consider himself handsome, but he certainly felt older and more responsible than the boy he'd been at Aunt Edna's. He even appreciated the fact that Aunt Edna's nagging at him about hard work and discipline might not have been such a bad thing after all.

At one point, James playfully tackled Glennall. They wrestled in the dirt for a moment, much to the amusement of the other workers. When Glennall got the better of him, James laughed and cried, "Foul!"

Glennall stood, extending his hand to James to pull him to his feet.

When their hands clasped, everything around them changed. The men disappeared. The camp was deserted. The shacks, so newly repaired, looked worse than they ever had: Roofs were collapsed, walls were fallen down, and doors were off their hinges. Wild dogs, thin and diseased, sniffed around for food. A rat scurried away toward the stone buildings, which were mere shells now. The camp had been left to ruin.

"What happened here?" James asked Glennall, who

stood nearby.

"They weren't prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

Then a deep voice shouted, "Are you two playing or not?" and James and Glennall were standing back on the field. The men watched them curiously. By now they had all heard about the boys and their "powers," but none had witnessed it firsthand.

"I think I've had enough," Glennall said. He waved to the men and walked off toward the stone building.

James did the same. When they were out of earshot of anyone else, he asked, "What did it mean?"

"I don't know," Glennall replied.

"What did you mean when you said they weren't prepared? Prepared for what?"

"I don't know."

"But—"

Glennall turned on him, annoyed. "James, *I don't know* what it meant."

"You don't have to get mad."

Glennall paused at the door of their apartment. He took a deep breath as if to control himself. "I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I'm scared."

James understood. Some of these visions had left him feeling terrible and apprehensive. "I know why *I'm* scared, but why are *you* scared?"

"Because I think something horrible is going to happen."

"To us?"

"To the whole world."



The light in his eyes woke him up. James winced, then squinted. “What? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Get up. Hurry.” It was Barric. He stood next to James’s bed, still dressed in his best clothes and a long overcoat.

On the other side of the room, two guards whom James had never seen before were trying to get Glennall up.

“What’s going on?” Glennall asked sleepily. “Barric, what time is it?”

“Two in the morning,” Barric said. “Get your things together.” His tone was low and serious. “I have to take you away *now*.”

“Take us where?” James asked as he sluggishly swung his legs off the bed. “Where’s Estburn?”

“He’s still in Muirk. But he’ll be coming soon.”

“He sent you for us?”

“No. Chalcer did.”

“Chalcer!”

“Yes. Look, there’s no time to explain. I’ll tell you everything in the coach.”

“We can’t just *leave*. Not without papers,” Glennall protested. “This is a *prison* camp. We could be executed for trying to escape.”

“I have your papers. Chalcer arranged everything. Now hurry up!”

James had no difficulty in packing. He’d always known that if he left the camp, there’d be little he’d want to take with him.

“Bring your ledger books and all your papers about the camp’s finances,” Barric instructed Glennall. Glennall obeyed. He would have taken the ledger books anyway. For him, they were the only proof of his abilities.

It had started to rain by the time they were dressed, packed, and loaded into the coach. James noted that it wasn't Estburn's coach but a royal coach from the palace, with the king's seal of two lions around a crest of blue and gold on the doors. James felt as if he might be swallowed up by the seats, the cushions were so thick and soft. The driver urged the horses on to the prison gate. Barric said a few friendly words to the guard there, who was equally puzzled by the middle-of-the-night activity. He snapped to attention, however, when he read the papers. After a moment of fiddling with stamps and signatures in the guardhouse, he flagged them on.

For the first time in months, James and Glennall were beyond the camp fence. The mountain air was crisp. The moons were stark, penetrating the shadows and sharply defining the trees against the pale night sky. And unlike Glennall and James's arrival at the camp in a decrepit prison wagon, they were leaving it in luxury—a luxury they didn't understand.

Glennall leaned toward Barric. "What's this all about?" he inquired.

Barric's face was hidden in the darkness of the coach. "I'm a friend of Chalcer's who was sent to the camp to keep an eye on things," he explained.

"A friend," James said blankly.

"A *spy,*" Glennall noted.

Barric didn't deny it. "It was no coincidence that I arrived to serve Estburn after Chalcer returned to the palace. Chalcer wanted to know what Estburn was up to."

"Why should Chalcer care about a prison camp official?" James asked.

Glennall smiled darkly. "No doubt Chalcer was looking for a way to get back at Estburn for that beating."

"That may have been part of his intention. I don't know. My instructions were to watch out for you two."

"Us?" James and Glennall responded together, surprised.

Barric shrugged. "Chalcer was deeply affected by whatever had happened between you. And he imagined that Estburn would make use of you somehow. I was sent to see how and to make sure he didn't harm you."

"Is that why we're running away now? Was Estburn going to hurt us?" Glennall asked.

"Yes."

"Why? We haven't done anything wrong," argued James.

"No, but Chalcer has."

"What are you talking about?"

"The awards banquet tonight." Barric smiled. "I wish you'd seen it."

"Uh-oh. What happened?"

"Well, Estburn got up to make his acceptance speech for the award. It was a rambling thing that went on for ages. Mostly he took all the credit for his accomplishments with the camp."

James rolled his eyes. "So much for a quick thank-you."

Barric continued, "Chalcer received his own award next—and then made public what a fraud Estburn is."

"He said so then and there?" James found it hard to believe.

Barric nodded. "He announced that all of Estburn's success was due to two young men he had back at the camp."

James's mouth fell open. "He told them about *us?"*

"Estburn was outraged, of course. He stood up and demanded an apology. The king seemed amused by the whole scene but insisted that Chalcer couldn't make such accusations without proof. Chalcer said he would offer proof."

"We're the proof," Glennall said.

"Yes."

"But why rush away in the middle of the night?" asked James. "Why not go in the morning?"

"Chalcer was afraid that Estburn would get to you first and either hide you away or worse."

"Kill us?"

"Yes. Estburn is a very prideful man, you know." Barric gazed out the window into the night. James suddenly realized he wasn't the same pleasant servant they'd come to know over the past few months. He was a purposeful young man. He continued without looking back at them. "As it turns out, Chalcer was right. Estburn called me to his room directly after the banquet and demanded that I rush back to the camp. He instructed me to lock you up in the mine until his return tomorrow. But since I work for Chalcer, I came back to free you instead."

"But we're not free, are we?" Glennall said.

“Not exactly. Chalcer wants you at the palace for the time being.”

James nudged Glennall. “At least we’re moving up in the world.”

Glennall didn’t respond. They rode on in silence for a few minutes.

James thought about it and then chuckled softly. “Estburn is going to be very surprised,” he stated.

Barric smiled again. “Yes, he will be. After tomorrow, he’ll probably be working in the mine himself.”

“The other workers won’t let him do that for long,” Glennall observed.

“Exactly.”



“We’re here,” Barric said, nudging James, who had fallen asleep.

James sat up in time to see them finish their drive along a wall that was at least 20 feet high. It stretched out behind them for three or four city blocks. They reached two ornate wrought-iron gates—or were they made of gold?—and were allowed to enter by two guards in uniforms of blue and gray. On the lintel above the gate was the king’s crest, just like the one on the doors of the coach.

Turning through the gates from the main road, the coach headed down the main driveway to the palace. The driveway stretched a couple of hundred yards to the front of the palace, lit along the way by small lamps. They looked like small stars that had formed a procession to pay homage to the king. It was hard for James to see the surrounding grounds in the dark, but the front of the palace was ablaze with light coming mostly from the countless windows reaching to the left and right from the front doors.

Barric said, “Welcome to Muirkostle.”

“Muirkostle?” Glennall asked.

“That’s the formal name, the ancient name that goes back longer than anyone can remember.”

“When we worked for Alexx, everyone simply called it

‘the palace,’” Glennall recalled. “I didn’t know it had a formal name.” He stared out the window for a moment. “What kind of building is it?” Obviously, his interest in details was unaffected by the beauty of the place.

“It’s several buildings,” Barric replied as they slowly made their way down the driveway. “The original castle is there to the left. Even in the dark, you can see the outlines of the towers and turrets. They’re made of solid Palatian stone, from the quarries of Beforshe, Offord, Middexe, and Suirk, which is why they’re still standing after so many centuries.”

Glennall grunted noncommittally. He wouldn’t dare admit to the superiority of Palatian stones, as his sense of rivalry between Marus and Palatia was great.

Barric went on: “Breskin, King Akvych’s great-grandfather, added the central section of the palace—the one you see directly ahead of us. It has over 100 rooms.”

“The new wing, built by King Akvych’s father, Williv, has 40 rooms. That’s where the royal family lives, over there to the right.”

“Why so many rooms?”

“The rooms in the main building are for state occasions, mostly. The Grand Reception Room, the Banquet Hall—which has a table long enough to seat 150 people—and the Throne Room all have different functions. I won’t bore you with the details.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I grew up here. My father was a captain of the palace guard.”

Glennall jabbed an elbow at James, who was still gazing at the palace. “James, you’re awfully quiet,” he observed.

James couldn’t speak. He couldn’t take his eyes off the palace. It was the biggest and grandest thing he’d ever seen.

They stopped in front of the doors, and Barric leaped out of the coach. “Wait here,” he instructed.

“Don’t you think it’s amazing?” James asked Glennall.

Glennall sniffed with feigned disinterest. “It’s gaudy and overdone—like everything in Palatia.”

Barric returned and told them, “Come on.”

They followed him through the front doorway, where two tall black doors stood open on both sides, and into a high-ceilinged, circular reception area. There suits of armor and statues of past kings surrounded them.

“This way,” Barric said as he gestured, and they walked to the right down a long hallway covered in gold-leaf designs, velvet wall adornments, paintings, and tapestries. The doors to all the rooms were closed except for one. At a glance, James saw a long room with crystal chandeliers, royal-blue carpet, light wood paneling, and chairs lined up facing one another. At the head of the chairs was a larger chair on a small platform adorned with red curtains. James guessed it was the Throne Room Barric had mentioned.

They suddenly turned down another hallway that went up a few stairs to yet another hall, then turned right and down a few stairs, then back up and along another lengthy passage. Finally they reached a door where Barric stopped and knocked gently.

“Come in,” a voice said. James recognized it immediately as Chalcer’s.

His room—an office—was average-sized, with plush carpet, dark wallpaper, and windows covered by closed curtains. Inside were a writing desk and several chairs. There was also a round table that James assumed was for meetings. Shelves lined the walls with rolled-up papers, loosely bound manuscripts, and leather-backed books. Chalcer sat at the writing desk. In spite of the lit lamps over his head, he still had a candle burning nearby. He put down his quill pen and stood up.

“Hello, young men,” he said with a click of his heels and a sharp bow.

James and Glennall repeated the gesture as best they could.

“Your journey was trouble-free, I hope?”

“Yes, sir,” Glennall replied.

“Good.” He rubbed his hands together. “The king wants to see you first thing in the morning.”

James and Glennall couldn’t disguise their surprise.

“Why does he want to see us?” James stammered.

“There are things he wishes to discuss with you.”

Glennall opened his mouth to ask another question, but Chalcer waved him down.

“No questions,” he instructed. “I want the two of you to get some sleep first. In the morning, you’ll be bathed and then given appropriate clothes to wear.” He tilted his head toward Barric.

“Off we go,” Barric said.

They walked down the labyrinth of halls for another five minutes. Two doors were open on opposite sides of the last hall they reached.

“Glennall, you’re in the bedroom to the left, and James is in the one on the right.” Barric waited in the center of the hall while the two boys went to their rooms. “Sleeping gowns are on the beds. Strip your clothes off and leave them in the basket next to the bathroom door. The servants will take them while you sleep. Fresh clothes will be given to you in the morning. I hope you sleep well.”

James and Glennall smiled at each other, then retreated into their respective rooms. James closed the door behind him. Two lamps, one on the bedstand and another on a small table near the window, were the only light he had. He didn’t undress but threw himself onto the large, inviting four-poster bed. He sank into the downy mattress and gazed up at the canopy. The light flickered, giving only glimpses of a tapestry there. It looked like men on horseback fighting in a battle on a rich, green hillside.

They sure like their battle scenes, James thought.

It was the last thing he remembered thinking until he was awakened the next morning.



Bathed and dressed in stylish but comfortable breeches, shirts, jackets, and new boots, James and Glennall were taken by Barric to the Throne Room James had seen the night before. In the daylight, it was even larger than he had thought. The walls were lined with gold tables, each with a glass-covered display of a vase or a clock or china of some sort. There was also a large marble fireplace. The room was paneled, but inside each panel was a painting of someone in royal garb.

"Sit down in the two chairs nearest the throne," Barric instructed them. "Chalcer and the king will be in presently." He exited, closing the door behind him.

James could hardly control the butterflies in his stomach. "What does he want with us?" he whispered to Glennall.

"I think he'll want to talk about the camp," Glennall replied. "Maybe he's interested in how we made it a financial success."

"Do you think he'll give you a job?"

"Give *us* a job, you mean."

"No, I mean *you*," James insisted. "Look, you're the one who's doing everything. You don't need me."

Just then the door opened. Instinctively, the two boys stood up. It was the right move. Chalcer entered the room and stood to one side while another man came in. There was no doubt from his manner that he was the king. But James didn't think he *looked* like a king. Instead of the heavy royal robes James had seen in the vision, King Akvych now wore a pair of white breeches and matching jacket, black boots, a plain white shirt, and a red vest. His hair was close-cut, and a thin, golden circlet sat lightly on his head. There was no mistaking the face, though. Milky white, smooth and clean-shaved, with

a jaw set firm like stone.

King Akvych walked up to the throne on the platform and sat down. He wiggled his fingers at the two boys. “Sit down, please,” he said. His voice was higher than James had expected it to be.

James and Glennall sat down again. Chalcer remained standing to the right of the king.

“I have heard wondrous things about the two of you,” the king began. “The work you’ve done at the prison camp is most remarkable. But that is not why I’ve asked you to see me.”

He paused to scrutinize the boys. James wriggled in his chair.

“There is another more serious matter that we must discuss.” He then put a finger to his lips as if he had suddenly remembered something. “But first, tell them the news, Chalcer.”

Chalcer cleared his throat and announced, “The king, in his mercy, has pardoned you from any charges resulting in your imprisonment.”

The king added, “In light of the things we have learned about our former comrade Alexx and his notorious wife, we cannot help but believe you are innocent of their accusations.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” James said happily.

“Yes, thank you,” Glennall said.

James wondered if this also meant they were no longer slaves.

The king seemed to know what James was thinking. “You were brought to this country as slaves,” he continued. “But you will not remain so. Stay with me for a time, not as slaves but as servants, and you will be rewarded with your freedom.”

Again the two boys thanked him.

Glennall dared to ask, “How may we serve Your Majesty?”

The king eyed the door as if to make sure it was closed, then spoke more softly than before. “Chalcer tells me you have powers.”

“They are not *our* powers, but only those abilities which the Unseen One has given to us,” Glennall said calmly.

“Yes, I know all about the god of Marus—this *Unseen One*.” The king’s tone had an edge of impatience. “But you *do*

have powers. Powers that gave Chalcer a glimpse into his future."

"We are not fortune-tellers, Sire."

"I would not be speaking to you now if you were fortune-tellers. My court is overrun with so-called fortune-tellers and wizards and prophets serving gods of old and gods of new and the gods know what else. I'm sick of their advice."

"What is it that Your Majesty desires?"

The king sighed deeply. "Peace of mind."

"What troubles you, Sire?" Glennall asked.

"I have daydreams that are nightmares. Or perhaps they are nightmares that are my daydreams." The king scrubbed his hands over his face wearily. "Either way, they haunt me day in and day out. No one can tell me why I'm having them or what they mean. Now Chalcer has suggested that I speak to you."

James swallowed hard. This was a test. What if the Unseen One wouldn't let them help the king? What would the king do to them if they failed?

Glennall spoke firmly. "King Akvych, we are not interpreters of dreams. We see only what the Unseen One shows us."

"Then let us hope that your Unseen One will show you what is in my mind." The king stood up—the boys leaped to their feet as well—and walked down to them. He grabbed one of the chairs and dragged it near to them. Then he sat down and held out his hands. "Here. Take my hands."

"Sire," James said, worried enough to speak, "we can't *make* it happen. It's not up to us."

The king looked at James. His eyes were moist. "If nothing happens, I am no worse off than I was before. If something happens, then maybe your Unseen One will help us to understand why I'm so troubled. Now take my hands."

The room seemed thick with silence. It hung around them like one of the velvet curtains. A clock ticked somewhere, probably under a glass case on a golden table. Chalcer stood where he was, watching them.

Glennall took the king's right hand in both of his. James felt a chill go up his back. He took the king's left hand in his. The king's hand was warm and smooth to James's touch.

Nothing happened. The clock ticked. The silence continued. The king looked at the two boys, then closed his

eyes and sighed again. “I suppose it was too much to ask.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” Glennall said.

“Some other time, perhaps,” the king whispered as he made to stand up. James and Glennall also began to rise.

They were all still holding hands, James noticed, as if the king needed their help to stand up. The weight of the king as he got to his feet caused James to lose some of his balance. He jerked a little toward Glennall. Glennall quickly slipped his right hand from the king’s grasp and reached out to steady James. James stumbled enough for Glennall’s hand to slip down his arm. Their hands touched.

Instantly, the three of them were no longer standing in the Throne Room but found themselves in the middle of a large field. To their left, they saw a herd of large, fat cows moving slowly toward a huge blue lake. They were joined by enormous pigs, plump chickens, and other kinds of fowl. As this procession moved in their slow, herdlike way, they seemed to shrink, as if someone had let the air out of them. They got thinner and thinner. Their legs, now spindly, buckled underneath them. One by one, all the animals fell until there were none left to reach the lake.

Then James noticed that the lake itself was no longer blue but a stagnant pool of green slime with dead fish floating on the top.

“This is my dream,” the king said to them, his eyes alight as if he felt joy to share it with someone. He pointed to the right. “Look there!”

James and Glennall turned to look. A field of grain stood before them, the tops blowing gently in the wind. Mixed in with the grain were trees bearing fruit of all kinds. Then the wind picked up in its intensity until it was a gale force beating the grain and the trees until they could no longer stand. The grain tore from the ground like weeds, the trees were uprooted as if an invisible hand had plucked them like brittle sticks, and they all blew away.

“You now see what I have seen,” the king said. Then they heard a roar from the distance. “What is this?” the king asked, alarmed. “This is new. I have not dreamed it before.”

A great crowd of people approached them, their arms outstretched, their faces thin death masks. They begged for food, for help. James remembered this scene—he had seen it before. But he realized now that these people were dressed

not just as Palatians but also as Marutians, and in clothes he had never seen before. It was as if the entire world had descended upon them.

"What can I do for you?" the king cried to the crowd as they clawed at him.

"We have lost everything! We have nothing left," the people shouted. "Feed us! Give us shelter!"

"I do not know what to do," the king said.

The people wept and wailed at them.

James had an idea. He said quickly to King Akvych and Glennall, "Something like this once happened in my world. A lot of people lost all their money, and many lost everything they ever had. It was called the Great Depression."

"Was there a war?" the king asked.

"No."

"A famine, then," Glennall said.

"No."

"Then how did they lose all they had?" the king asked.

"My father said they didn't save enough of it," James replied. For reasons that escaped him, he quickly added, "But my Aunt Edna said they didn't put it in the right places to begin with."

It seemed like a ridiculous thing to say, standing in the middle of the crowd like that. But the crowd and the field faded away, and James, Glennall, and the king were standing once again in the Throne Room.

King Akvych was visibly shaken, but he said decisively, "Now I understand."

Chalcer, looking worried, was at their sides. "Sire, what happened?" he asked. "Are you all right?"

Glennall fell back into his chair, in breach of the usual etiquette around a royal person. "Something terrible is coming," he said gravely.

"What's it going to be?" James asked, the words clicking dryly in his mouth. "How's it going to happen?"

Glennall shook his head. "A famine? Disease? Drought? It could be anything."

"What are we to do?" the king asked as he slumped into his chair.

Chalcer was bewildered. "Are you so sure it will happen? Maybe you've misunderstood what you saw."

"Did you misunderstand when *you* saw what would

happen to you?" King Akvych asked as a sharp rebuke. "No, my friend. Before now I misunderstood what I saw in my dreams. But *now*—now I understand clearly. I must call my advisers. I must gather together the greatest minds in the country. We must think of how to prepare for this . . . this catastrophe."

"With the greatest respect, Sire," Glennall began, then shot a look at James, "I don't think your advisers will give you better advice than you received from James."

The king looked back and forth between the two boys expectantly. "I didn't grasp what he said. Explain it to me."

"Tell him your idea, James."

James felt nervous and put on the spot. "I'm not sure it was really an idea," he said. "It was just a thought."

"Tell him your thought, then."

"My world—er, the place I come from—had a terrible problem," James started hesitantly. "A lot of folks lost all their money, the banks had to close down, and people lost their jobs and were thrown out of their homes. Many starved."

"Just as we saw in the dream," the king observed.

"I guess so."

"What was your thought?" asked Glennall.

"I remember my father saying that it was because people didn't invest their money very well, they didn't put it in the right places where it would be safe. Then my Aunt Edna argued with him and said it was mostly because they weren't *wise* about their money to begin with. She said something like . . ." He stammered again as he tried to remember what she said. "Where people's treasures are, that's where their hearts are. So we must store treasures in a place that will last forever. Or something like that."

Glennall leaned toward the king, his eyes on fire. "Your Majesty, if we plan *now*—if we put stores of food and water away *now*—we may have enough to take care of the people when the trouble starts."

"Feed the entire country? It can't be done," the king scoffed.

"Not only the entire country, Sire, but other countries as well," Glennall said. "Palatia is a rich and prosperous nation. If we stored away even a *quarter* of all we have, we would do well in a time of difficulty."

"It's an enormous task," Chalcer interjected.

Glennall shrugged. “It’s better than starving to death.”

“But *how* can we do it?” the king asked, his voice tense, his brow knitted.

“If I were Your Highness—which I am not, of course—I would divide the country into districts. Then I would put people in charge of those districts, like governors, to collect and assemble the stores from the people. They would report to Your Highness—or to someone Your Highness puts in charge of the plan.” Glennall sat back. James thought he looked pretty pleased with himself.

The king looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, “I will consult with my advisers. Chalcer, call them together immediately.” He reached out to touch the two boys approvingly but seemed to think better of it, as if he feared seeing another vision. “One is enough for the day,” he said. And for the first time, he smiled.



Later that day, James and Glennall were in one of the palace gardens, playing a Palatian game that, for James, seemed like a cross between baseball and croquet. Barric taught it to them and then gathered some of the servants to play.

James had just scored a point when he saw Chalcer crossing the large green lawn toward them. James and Glennall dropped their equipment and ran to him when he called their names. "The king wants to meet with you again," Chalcer informed them.

"Did he meet with his advisers?" Glennall asked.

"Yes. They all agreed that your plan is brilliant. It will be put into effect immediately."

"Then why does the king want to see us?" James wondered aloud.

Chalcer didn't answer at first. He clasped his hands behind his back and began walking toward the palace, motioning for them to follow. He looked grim. Finally he said, "Allow me to explain something to you. The king had a son who was his pride and joy. He died at 12 years of age." Chalcer glanced at James. "Around *your* age, I think. But had he lived, he would now be closer to your age, Glennall."

"How did he die?"

"A mysterious disease that none of the doctors could cure." Chalcer was silent for another moment, then went on, "The king was heartbroken by the death of his son. Now he looks at the two of you and, I believe, he sees his son again."

"Why are you telling us this?" Glennall asked. "We have no desire to try and fill the void left by his son."

"Maybe you don't. And I hope you would not try to exploit the king's affections."

"You'd stop us anyway," James observed.

“So I would.”

“What does this have to do with our meeting with the king?” Glennall asked. Something was troubling him, but James didn’t know what.

“You will have to learn that for yourself,” Chalcer answered.

King Akvych was in his state chambers, which James quickly realized was a fancy name for his office. He was gazing out the window when Chalcer brought in James and Glennall.

“Ah, my two prophets,” the king said amiably. “Come in and sit down.”

“Only if Your Highness will sit,” Glennall stated.

The king chuckled. “As you wish.” He sat down behind his desk, a massive and ornate block of wood that James thought could have served as a wardrobe. The king folded his hands in front of him. “I have spoken with my advisers, and they thought highly of your plan. In fact, they thought it was pure genius. Of course, they don’t all believe in dreams and visions or that this famine is coming, but they see the benefit of taking action just in case. Besides,” he added with a smile, “I’m the king, and I said they have to do it.”

Glennall tilted his head forward, as if bowing. “We are honored by your faith in the Unseen One and what He’s revealed to us.”

“You are to be honored still more.”

“Sire?”

“I discussed with my advisers the question of *who* should be my representative in carrying out these plans. I want someone who will meet with the governors of the districts, make sensible and prudent decisions, and oversee the entire business. I want someone who will be *me* to the people. Sadly, we could not think of anyone among our established ranks.”

James’s eyes widened as he suddenly realized what this meeting was about.

The king went on. “Then I realized that I must look outside our established ranks to make such a radical plan work the way it should. Which is why I decided that *you* should be my representative.”

Glennall froze in place. Not a limb, not a muscle, not even an eyelash moved.

The king laughed at his predictable reaction. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

“I’m speechless, Sire.” Glennall shifted nervously in his seat.

“You think you *can* do it, can’t you?”

“I believe I can, Sire.”

“I *know* you can. I have not been idle since we met this morning. I have learned what I can about you both. I know how you turned Alexx’s fortunes around, even though his wife squandered them. I know what you did for the prison camp. Now I’m confident of what you can do for me. So, Glennall, say yes and get on with the work you must do,” the king concluded.

“Then, yes, Sire.”

“Good,” King Akvych affirmed. Next, he looked at James. “And as for you . . .”

“I’ll be his assistant,” James said dryly.

This time the king was surprised. “How did you know?”

James smiled. “I’m *always* his assistant. I think it’s what I was sent here to do.”



That night, James was amused to watch as Glennall was fitted for an entirely new wardrobe. The servants fluttered around him, taking measurements, trying different colors, making him stand this way or stretch his arms out that way.

The whole time, James sat and observed while eating from a bowl of grapes. “You haven’t told the king who you are,” he said when the servants had gone.

Glennall glanced uneasily around him, making sure no one could overhear. “I don’t intend to,” he replied.

“Why not?”

“Why should I? It would serve little purpose.”

James had to agree. If the king found out that Glennall was from a wealthy family in Marus, he might suspect him of being a spy or of giving away their plans for the future or . . .

“I’ll change my name so my family won’t know who I am.”

"Change it to what?"

"Simply *Glenn*."

"They won't know?"

"It's a common name in both Marus and Palatia." He rubbed his chin. "I think I'll also grow a beard."

"Can you?"

"Of course I can." Then an odd smile crept onto Glennall's face.

"What's so funny?" James asked.

"My family."

"What about them?"

"If only they could see me now." Glennall laughed long and hard at the thought. But James detected a hint of darkness in his eyes, an edge to his laugh.

"You've given up on the idea of revenge, I hope."

He looked at James with a frown. "Given up? When the Unseen One has put me in a position to make things right with my brothers—to *show* them? No, I have not given up."

James popped another grape into his mouth. "What's the point?"

"The point? The point is that they betrayed me, and I will get back at them for it. Why else would the Unseen One put me in this position?"

"Maybe so you can do *other* things," James said. "A lot has happened since the cave. Everything has turned out so well. I don't understand why you want to hurt them."

"You can't understand. It's impossible for you to understand."

James began to feel hot under the collar. "Why is it *impossible* for me to understand? Look, Mr. Big Shot, everything that's happened to you has happened to me, too. I was kidnapped and sold as a slave just like you were. I wound up in the prison camp just like you did. I was beaten and pushed around just like you. It's not like you suffered anything by yourself."

"But you weren't abandoned by your family."

"Wasn't I?" James challenged, the emotion rising in his throat as he thought of his parents and how they left him behind—how they died.

Glennall was too lost in the argument to realize how James was feeling. He replied defensively, "You were abandoned in a manner of speaking, yes, but not like *I* was

abandoned. I was my father's favorite, destined to be the family *leader*. I was going to be a rich and powerful ruler in my country. Whereas *you*—" Glennall stopped himself, blushing furiously.

"Whereas I *what?"* James demanded, standing up and spilling the bowl of grapes.

"I mean—"

"I wasn't going to be anybody, is that what you were going to say? I'm just an orphan, some tramp you took under your wing. Now I get it. I see what you really think about me." James stormed out of the room, nearly knocking a servant over in the hallway on the way to his own room. He slammed the door and threw himself on the bed.

Growling, he lay there with clenched fists, feeling as if steam were rising from his body. *The nerve!* he thought. *He's too big for his britches now and doesn't need me anymore.*

Footsteps fell past the door. He wondered if Glennall would come in to apologize.

Then came the doubt. Why should Glennall apologize? For hurting his feelings or speaking the truth? James wasn't the son of a wealthy man. He was an orphan, there was no denying it. And he hadn't accomplished anything on his own. Everything he'd done in this world had been with Glennall—*because* of Glennall. It was Glennall's brains that got them into such a good position with Alexx. The same was true at the prison camp. What had James done? Not much. And now all he had to look forward to was wandering around the countryside on Glennall's coattails.

What am I doing here? he wondered. Maybe his purpose for coming to this world had been fulfilled: He had somehow helped Glennall get to the top position in the land. Surely that's why the Unseen One had brought him here. There was nothing else for James to do.

It's time to go home, he thought.



James turned the knob in the wall near the head of the bed. Nearly 10 minutes later a servant came, looking as if he'd just awakened and had hastily dressed to answer James's call.

Embarrassed, James realized it was after midnight. "I need to talk to Chalcer," he told the servant.

"Can it wait until morning?" the servant replied.

"I won't be here in the morning."

The servant looked surprised, then hurried off. Five minutes later, a different servant returned and said, "Follow me."

Chalcer was alone in what they called the Games Room. It was a large room with tables for playing billiards, table tennis, even cards. Chalcer, dressed casually, was hunched over a billiard table with a cue, setting up a shot.

"Come in," he invited James. The balls clacked as he took his shot. "Do you play?"

"No, sir."

"I could teach you."

"No, thank you."

Chalcer moved around the table to take another shot. "They said you want to leave us."

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"I think I've done all I can do here. It's time to go home."

Chalcer took his shot, grunted at the result, then took another position on the table. He said, "I was also told that you and Glennall had an argument."

James shrugged. "Not really."

"They said you got angry and rushed out of the room." He took another shot, clacking more balls. "That sounds like

an argument to me."

"I was mad, yes, but that's beside the point. Glennall can do what he needs to do without me. It's time for me to go home."

"Where is home?"

"It's . . ." James hesitated. He didn't know how to answer. "It's back through Marus."

Chalcer scanned the table as if he didn't know what shot to take next. "I think you should talk to Glennall first," he suggested after making up his mind.

"I'd rather not. He'd talk me into staying when I know I shouldn't. It's time to go."

Chalcer lined up his shot and took it. "Why tell me?" He stood up straight, putting chalk to the cue tip.

"Because you can tell the guards not to stop me."

"Aren't you afraid of being picked up as a runaway slave?"

James had forgotten that, technically, he was still a slave. He didn't feel like one. And the king had said he would set them free. "I won't be if the king will set me free."

Chalcer took another shot, then stood up to face James. Shadows from hanging lamps flickered across his stocky body and sturdy face. "He already has."

James wasn't sure of what he'd just heard. "What?"

"He gave me the papers tonight. You and Glennall are free men again. I was going to tell you both tomorrow morning."

James was speechless. Finally he muttered, "Thank you."

"What are you planning to do, *walk* back to Marus?"

"I guess so."

"What'll you do for food on the way?"

"I don't know."

"Lodging?"

"I don't know."

"Do you even know how to get there?"

"No. But I'll bet I can figure it out."

Chalcer chuckled. "Are you normally so ill-prepared when you run away?"

James thought about all the times he had run away from Aunt Edna. "Yeah, I guess so."

Chalcer leaned over the table again and took another

shot. Satisfied that the balls had gone where he wanted them to, he stood up again. “Allow me to make arrangements for you. You have done a great service for the king. I believe he would insist. Go back to your room, and I’ll send someone to you with the details.”

“Thanks,” James said. He went to the door, then paused there. “You won’t tell Glennall?”

“I’ll have to tell him something.”

James thought about it a moment. “Tell him I went home. He’ll understand.”

The servant led James back to his room. About a half hour later, a knock came at the door. “Come in,” James said.

Barric stepped in and announced, “You and I are going on a trip to Marus. I’ve got a couple of horses waiting outside.”

“*You’re* taking me?”

“I drew the short straw,” he replied with a smile. “Have you packed your things?”

“I never had much.”

They stepped into the hallway. James looked across at the door to Glennall’s room.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk to him first?” Barric asked.

“I’m sure.”

Somewhere near the border between Marus and Palatia, James wished he had walked. He had never ridden a horse before, and this first lesson was far more painful than he ever would have thought. By the time he and Barric stopped at an old, stony inn for breakfast, James figured his entire body was bruised and every muscle was strained.

“Where are we?” James asked after Barric helped him off the horse.

“Rockhaven,” Barric replied. “It’s a small village near the Valley of the Rocks.”

A small, bald-headed man in an apron rushed out from the stable—a ramshackle structure of wood and tar paper—to

greet them. Barric instructed him to feed and water the horses. He led the horses away.

"Are you tired? Do you want to sleep?" Barric asked James. "This inn has rooms."

"I don't have any money," James admitted sheepishly.

Barric reached under his coat and produced a small, bulging purse. "You do now." He shook the bag, and the coins inside jingled. "With the king's warmest regards," he said as he opened it to show James the coins were all gold, then handed it over.

"The king is *giving* me this money?"

"More than just money," Barric explained, pulling an envelope from his coat pocket. "You are also to have this letter, sealed by the king himself, assuring your freedom and protection wherever you go. Even in Marus, it will be taken seriously. There is no one more powerful than King Akvych in all the surrounding countries."

"But why?" James asked as he held the purse and the letter.

Barric looked at James, perplexed by the question. "Why not? From the moment you set foot in Palatia, you have served the king, whether you realized it or not. You assisted Alexx, you reformed one of our prisons, and you have given the king clear guidance toward the future. This is how he shows his gratitude."

James hired two rooms for himself and Barric. They had a large breakfast, then slept for a few hours. Resuming their journey that afternoon, they continued along the southern roads of Marus with the hope of being in Dremat later that night.

Of course, it took longer than they expected because of James's lack of skill with his horse.



It was late when they reached Dremat, but the town still seemed bright and active. It reminded James of a cross between a large town in a Western movie and an English village he'd seen in a geography book. There were wooden

buildings filled with stores of groceries, clothes, hardware, and supplies. Nearby were buildings of stone or brick that had offices for lawyers, doctors, and dentists. Saloons and hotels were scattered up and down the main avenue.

On the far end of one street sat a small inn. Barric secured them a couple of rooms. James had a hot bath to try to soothe his aching body, and after a meal of soup and bread, they went to bed.

"Where are we going now?" Barric asked once they'd risen, eaten breakfast, and retrieved their horses from the local stable.

This was the moment James had dreaded. "I'm not sure," he admitted.

Puzzled, Barric gazed at him. "You don't know where your home is?"

"I know *where* it is," James stammered. "But I don't know exactly how to get there from here."

Barric stared at him blankly. "I don't understand a word you just said."

"I'll explain while we ride," James offered.

And he did. All the way up the side of one mountain and down another, he told his entire story to Barric—everything except Glennall's true identity. As they traveled, he searched for any clues, any familiar sights, that might remind him of where he first met Fantya, Visyn, and Deydra.

"It's a remarkable story," Barric finally said. They had stopped by a river to give the horses a drink and a rest.

"I wouldn't believe it if I were in your place."

"Why shouldn't I believe it?" Barric asked. "You and Glennall have some rather magical powers, powers I never thought were possible. I've never seen anyone with two colors of eyes like yours. So why would it be hard for me to believe that you came to this world from another?"

James didn't have an answer.

"Besides," he continued, "it doesn't matter whether I believe you or not. My assignment is to take you where you want to go. If it's a field in the middle of nowhere, then so be it. As long as I don't have to take you *all the way* into your world, I'm happy."

They stretched out under a large oak tree. It was a glorious summer day. The sun seemed to warm and massage James's aching limbs. The birds sang sweetly in the treetops

and lulled him to sleep.



James didn't know how long he'd been asleep—a few minutes, maybe an hour—but suddenly someone shouted, and it startled him awake. He sat up. Barric was on his feet, his body tense and poised as if he were about to pounce on something. Then James noticed there were maybe a dozen rough-looking men surrounding them. Two or three had muskets. With their homemade clothes, wild hair, and beards, they had the look of frontiersmen.

"We are unarmed," Barric said.

"You're trespassing," one of the men growled. His demeanor made James think he must be their leader.

James stood up. The sun was in his eyes, so he shielded them with his hand.

Barric spread his arms. "How were we to know? We saw no signs. No one warned us."

"Everybody around here knows that this land belongs to Connam and his sons."

"My king knows Connam," Barric said. "And until now, we've always had free passage through these lands."

"Who is your king?" the leader asked.

"King Akvych of Palatia."

"You are here on a mission for him?"

"Indirectly, yes."

"Then you'll want to speak with our master."

"You'll take me to Connam?"

"No, to his beloved son Sesta." The leader waved his hand at them. "Get your horses and come along with us."

The band of men guided James and Barric along winding lanes through the forest. Eventually they reached a large wooden gate that took them to a clearing. In the center stood a big timbered house with stairs leading up to a porch

that encompassed all sides. It had elaborate gables, shuttered windows, and a tower that stuck up arrowlike out of the main building. The house was not ornate or majestic in the way so many of the Palatian manors were, but it had a wealthy simplicity.

A large man with a bushy beard was on the porch near the front door, giving instructions to a group of men. They acknowledged whatever he said and took off in another direction. He had turned to go back inside when he spied the band of men bringing James and Barric. He waited where he stood. James knew him at once: Sesta.

"We found them by the river," the leader shouted as they approached. "The older one claims to be from King Akvych."

"King Akvych has sent a messenger to me?" Sesta asked. "Bring them up."

Two of the men took the reins to the horses from Barric and James and led the animals away. Escorted by half a dozen of the other men, Barric mounted the steps with James following.

Sesta had sat down on a lounge chair and beckoned his guests to sit as well.

"I bring greetings from King Akvych," Barric said formally after taking a seat.

"The king and his representatives are always welcome here," Sesta said. His eyes moved from Barric to James, then stopped on James's face. At first James thought Sesta had recognized him from that day with Nosz. Then he realized it wasn't recognition but fear that spread across Sesta's face. Sesta was staring at James's eyes.

"Leave us," Sesta commanded his men.

The leader looked puzzled. "What?"

Sesta turned on him. "Go! Leave us alone."

The leader muttered to the men, and they marched off.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" Sesta asked. His tone had changed. It no longer had the formal politeness he'd used with Barric but was now hard and threatening.

"I have brought this young man back to Marus," Barric began to explain.

Sesta cut him off. "What business does the king of Palatia have with a prophet of the Unseen One?"

"Prophet?"

"Don't you see? He has the mark of the Unseen One."

"Ah, his different-colored eyes," Barric replied. "Palatians aren't superstitious about such things. This young man has been of service to the king, and as a favor we're bringing him back to his homeland."

"Then why bring him to me?" Sesta asked.

"Because he asked to be brought here."

"He doesn't belong here," Sesta said sharply. He was staring at James again. "Take him somewhere else. He's from the Unseen One, which usually means nothing but trouble for me and my family. He's a sign, an omen, that something terrible is about to happen to us."

"Something bad is going to happen, but it won't be my fault," James said, speaking for the first time.

"You see?" Sesta spat at Barric. "Take him back to Palatia. I don't want anything to do with the boy."

"I don't want to go back to Palatia," James stated simply. And suddenly he knew that it wasn't only because of Glennall. He didn't want to go back because he was *supposed* to be in Marus. It was a certainty that surprised him. Was the Unseen One at work again?

"Then go somewhere else."

Barric stood up. It was clear to him that nothing remained to be discussed. "Let's be on our way, James."

But James knew he wasn't supposed to go. He was supposed to be here now. Why, he couldn't say. But he knew it was true, so he said the only thing he could think of to get Sesta to back down: "How are your brothers?"

"My brothers?"

"You have brothers."

"Ten of them." Sesta eyed him suspiciously.

"But you had 11."

Sesta nodded. "It's common knowledge that one of our beloved brothers was tragically killed by wild animals."

"Wild animals?" James asked carefully. "I thought he'd fallen down a mine shaft."

Sesta looked at James, a suspicious look on his face. "Wild animals killed him in the forest. We never found the body, but we found his bloodstained clothes."

James kept his eyes on Sesta. "Did anyone look in the mines for his body? In Arinshill Mine, for example?"

Sesta didn't answer.

Confused by this exchange, Barric suggested impatiently, “James, if we’re returning to Palatia, we should leave now.”

“Shall I leave for Palatia?” James asked Sesta coolly.

Sesta stared back, as if trying to read James’s intentions on his face. Then he suddenly said, “No. You are welcome here.”

“You want him to stay?” Barric asked, surprised by this dramatic change of heart.

“Yes. Thank you.”

Barric turned to James. “And do you want to stay?”

James simply nodded.

“Then I’ll say good-bye.”

Sesta called for one of his men to bring the horses around.

James walked with Barric down the steps to the waiting horses and shook his hand. “Thank you for everything, Barric,” he said warmly. “You’ve been a real pal.”

Leaning close to James, Barric whispered, “Remember the letter. I don’t trust this man, nor should you.”

“I’ll watch my step.”

Barric smiled and mounted his horse. He took the reins of the second horse and tied them to the horn of his saddle. “Until we meet again,” he said.

“Do you think we will?” James asked.

“I hope so.” Barric nudged his horse and rode off toward the gate and his journey home.

After Barric had disappeared around the bend, Sesta stepped up to James and asked, “What am I to do with you?”

“I had hoped to go home, but now . . .”

“Tell me where it is, and I will have my men take you immediately,” he offered, sounding almost desperate. “The sooner I can be rid of you, the better.”

“Why? I haven’t done anything to you.”

“But you will,” he said despondently. “I know the stories of the prophets. I know how the Unseen One punishes those who displease Him. You’re like a dark thundercloud that hides a fury of lightning. If I were my former self, I would strike you down here and now to keep your mouth closed.”

“Like you did your brother?”

Sesta’s face hardened, but his hands trembled. “I won’t argue with what you know or don’t know about him. All I can

say is that I have learned a lot since he *disappeared*. I am not the man I was. I see now that I have made terrible mistakes. But I cannot undo them. My brothers and I carry on as peacefully as we can."

"What about your father?"

"Don't toy with me, boy. If you know more than you're saying, speak plainly."

"Is he alive?"

"He is alive in his body, but his heart died the day we told him of our brother's disappearance. We had no idea how much he loved Glennall." Sesta looked away. James thought the man might cry. But after a moment, he turned back to James, steely-eyed. "What do you want from me?"

James couldn't answer. Though he was sure about staying here, he didn't know why or what he should do next.

"Well?" Sesta demanded.

"There was a man," James began slowly, trying to remember. "He knows about the Unseen One. He was a priest."

"Brother Dilliam."

"That's him." James remembered the name from Glennall.

"He lives at the shelter, farther up the mountain."

"A shelter?"

"It's a small community of fanatics," Sesta said derisively. "Men like him who live and breathe the Unseen One."

"Kind of like a monastery."

"If I knew what a monastery was, I might agree. As it is, I'm sure he'll make you feel welcome there."

"Then please take me to him."



The trip up the mountain was difficult for James, not because the traveling was difficult, but because he still didn't trust Sesta. Even with Sesta's little speech about being a changed man, James suspected there were still a lot of mine shafts left to be thrown into. He braced himself to run like a rabbit at

the first sign of trouble.

James was relieved but exhausted when they reached the iron door of what looked like a small fort. Sesta pulled a rope, and somewhere beyond the high wooden walls, a bell rang. A moment later, the iron door opened, the hinges groaning from its weight. A tiny white-haired man—even smaller than James—peered out at them.

"Tell Dilliam that Sesta has brought him a guest," Sesta ordered.

The man, dressed in a tunic, rushed off.

"I hope you enjoy it here," Sesta told James, then started off with his men. "Dilliam will know what to do with you."

James felt a sick feeling in his stomach, as if he'd made the biggest mistake of his life. Maybe he should have stayed with Barric. For that matter, maybe he should have stayed with Glennall in Palatia. He was safe there. Now he felt as if he were about to be sold into slavery again. He thought quickly, *If I run now, I can still go back to Palatia.*

"Ah!" someone exclaimed. James turned toward the sound of the voice at the door and found himself looking up at a giant of a man. He must have been well over six feet tall, with a crown of thin red hair that seemed spun around his face. His eyes were framed between the roundness of his cheeks and his forehead, but they sparkled anyway. He had a large mouth, framed by a red beard, that stretched into an enormous smile. He wore a long brown tunic. "I've been expecting you," he said in a low rumble of a voice.

Any fear or apprehension James had felt now melted in the brightness of this man. He was a complete stranger to James, yet James felt as if he'd known him all his life. *This is where I'm supposed to be*, James thought.

"Yes," the man said, his tone a warm blanket of comfort. "This is where you're supposed to be."



"This is your room," the man said.

James had followed the giant from the front door and across a courtyard filled with flowers of more colors than he thought possible—all of them more rich and vibrant than James had ever seen—with a well in the middle. They went to a long, single-story building off to the right. The man had to stoop to enter. The building had a hall stretching its length and many small rooms on both sides. The giant opened one of the doors in the middle of the hall and gestured for James to enter.

"Thank you," James said as he stepped into the small square room. It had a window, a single bed, a wooden bedside table, a dresser with two drawers, and a trunk.

"We keep extra blankets in the trunk," the man explained.

"Who are you?" James asked.

"I am Brother Dilliam."

"I thought so," James responded. "Why did you say you were expecting me?"

"Because it's true. We've been expecting you for quite a while now. We have seen it in our writings and heard whispers of it in our prayers."

"About *me?"*

Dilliam smiled. "You have been sent by the Unseen One."

James saw in Dilliam's eyes a deep sympathy, a compassion. For the first time, he felt he'd finally met someone who could help him understand what was going on. "Why? Why has the Unseen One sent me here?"

"Let's find out together," Dilliam replied.

James suddenly felt very tired. He sat down on the edge

of the bed. The mattress was thick and comfortable.

"You rest now," Dilliam suggested. "We have plenty of time to talk in the days and months ahead."

"Days and months?" James asked, yawning. "I don't think we have that long. Trouble is coming."

Dilliam began to pull the door closed. "Rest first, and then we'll talk."

James rolled back onto the mattress. It was so soft that he felt as if he had climbed onto a cloud. He fell asleep quickly, a deep and dreamless sleep, and didn't awaken until after dark. When he got up, two of the monks—he assumed they were monks because of their brown tunics—stood at the door with lamps. They seemed startled by his waking and quickly retreated.

The small white-haired man who'd first answered the door now entered with a lamp. He set it on the bedside table. "You'll have to forgive them," he apologized. "Everyone is very curious to see you."

"I'm nothing special," James said.

"On the contrary, we are *all* special in the eyes of the Unseen One. But your gifts set you apart from the rest of us, so, naturally, our humanity responds with feelings of curiosity and wonder."

James had no idea what the man was talking about. "What's your name?"

"I'm Brother Jessup," he replied.

"I'm James."

"I know." Brother Jessup returned to the door. "I have laid out a tunic for you. Brother Dilliam thinks you'll be more comfortable in it than in your city clothes. Then, when you're ready, we'll be eating supper in the kitchen. It is in the building directly across from this one."

James wanted to ask more questions, but Brother Jessup left before he could. He slowly got up and changed into the tunic. Brother Dilliam was right. It was more comfortable than his other clothes. He then ventured to the kitchen.

"Come in and sit with us," Brother Dilliam invited from the head of a long wooden table. It sat in the middle of the kitchen. About two dozen brothers stood on both sides of it, as if they were waiting for James. The only empty chair was next to Brother Dilliam, so James took it.

"Have mercy upon us," Dilliam intoned.

“Have mercy,” the brothers repeated.

“For this food we are grateful.”

Everyone sat down and began to eat. Though the various brothers chatted among themselves, James was aware that they kept watching him out of the corner of their eyes.

“We have a set routine here,” Brother Dilliam told James. “We share in all the responsibilities and chores, taking equal turns in the garden, in the kitchen, in cleaning the rooms, in whatever must be done to maintain our community. You will take your part with us in the morning.”

“I still don’t know what I’m doing here,” James whispered, embarrassed.

Dilliam whispered back, “You will, my son. There is much we will all learn from the work of our hands—and of our hearts.”

After the meal, they all went to another part of the building that had a chapel with pews facing an altar. There they read a story from a large scroll about the Unseen One and how He had first spoken to a man called Marus, for whom their nation was named. Then they sang songs James had never heard before. Brother Dilliam spoke for a few moments about the ways of the Unseen One and His never-ending love and mercy as shown to the people in good times and bad. He spoke of faith in the Unseen One even when we don’t understand His ways. He spoke of service to the Unseen One even when we have nothing to gain from it. After that, they spent time in silent prayer.

James still didn’t understand the Unseen One very well, but he felt a feeling of peace wash over him like a gentle summer shower. He wanted to stop time and hold this moment forever.

The service ended, and Dilliam invited James to walk with him in the garden. The smells of the flowers filled James’s head, and the warmth of the summer night made him feel contented.

“I could stay here forever,” James said abruptly, surprising himself with the statement.

“That’s how many people feel when they first come,” Dilliam replied. “But after a while, they get restless and move on.” He spoke without reproach or disappointment. He said it all as a statement of fact. “This life, the life of the brothers, is only for those chosen by the Unseen One to live it.”

"Then I've been chosen for it. I've never felt this . . . this *good*."

"I'm glad you do. For this is the time of joyous preparation. Enjoy it while you can."

"Preparation for what?"

"For the difficulties to come . . . and for your part in them."

"What difficulties?"

"There will be financial ruin for all who depend on such things. And then the livestock and the crops will suffer from mysterious diseases. Many will face starvation."

James's mouth fell open. "You *know* about that?"

"Yes. It was revealed to us by the Unseen One."

"But what does it have to do with me?"

"Your part is to help save the people of Marus."

James shook his head. "You've got it all wrong. I'm not going to save anybody. It's Glennall who's—"

Dilliam put his hand to his lips suddenly, as if masking his astonishment.

James instantly felt foolish. It was his intention never to mention Glennall's name. If Glennall's family or any of the people in Marus knew that Connam's son was alive in Palatia, and not only alive but wielding great power, it could complicate things for everyone.

"Then Glennall *is* alive, as I have always believed," Dilliam said thoughtfully.

James didn't answer at first.

"Tell me all, son," Dilliam encouraged him.

James resisted. He thought he shouldn't tell. But as he looked up at Dilliam, his resolve broke. If ever there was someone who could hear all and make sense of it, Dilliam was the one. James told him everything, from the point when he ran away from Aunt Edna to the point when he was standing at the shelter's door with Sesta. Dilliam listened attentively, interrupting once or twice to ask a clarifying question, and then nodded appreciatively when James had finished.

"Your secret is safe," Dilliam said as he put a reassuring hand on James's shoulder. "But it gives me an important piece to the puzzle. All our studying and praying told us that our hope for Marus in the time ahead would come from the south, from Palatia, but we couldn't imagine how Palatia would ever help us in a time of need. Traditionally, they befriend us only

when we have something to offer them. Otherwise, they hope for our downfall. But if Glennall is there . . .” Dilliam stroked his beard absentmindedly.

“He’s there, all right,” James said. “And he’s in a position to help everyone. You’ll see. That’s why I think you’ve got it wrong. Glennall will take care of everything. I’m just a . . . a nobody.”

“That’s where *you* are wrong, my son,” Dilliam said kindly. “You have been brought from your world for more than you know. But you can only understand as time goes on.”



The time did go on in a daily routine as consistent as a ticking clock. James spent his early mornings milking the three cows, feeding the chickens, and taking care of the goats and sheep. He and the other brothers then met in the chapel, learning the stories of the Unseen One from countless scrolls, and singing and praying. Next he helped Brother Jessup and the other brothers with breakfast and chores around the kitchen. From there they tended the gardens, cultivating flowers and growing vegetables. They took great care as well with a small orchard of fruit trees to the rear of the grounds.

A break in the afternoon allowed for rest or recreation. Often, during that time, Dilliam or Brother Jessup would tutor James in subjects like math and science and the arts. After that, their various assigned chores continued until dinnertime. Everyone helped with the cooking and washing up. Then came the evening service of songs and prayer, another time of relaxation and conversation, and finally bed. In the morning, it began all over again.

One day each week, the brothers were free simply to enjoy themselves. James went fishing in a nearby stream with Brother Jessup, wandered the forest close to the shelter (he was warned to stay clear of the timber mills and the mines or anything to do with Connam’s family), or relaxed in the garden and read.

James understood how a lot of people might find that

kind of life tedious or boring. *He* would've thought so before he'd come to Marus. But now he didn't. The kindness and love of the brothers, especially Brother Dilliam, made him feel happier and more contented than he ever had.

He also enjoyed studying more than he thought possible. The stories of the Unseen One held him spellbound. He read about the creation of the world through the Unseen One; the rise and fall and rise again of the first human beings; the many stories of Marus, who at first rejected the Unseen One and then became the father figure of the entire nation; and the events leading up to the Great Catastrophe, when a mysterious young boy, a messenger from another world, became the Unseen One's means of judgment against a sinful and rebellious world.

Through these stories, and through the daily show of love from the brothers, James came to realize that he had completely misunderstood the Unseen One. He was certainly a far cry from the deity James had heard about through Glennall. James had been given the impression that the Unseen One was powerful and calculating, moving people around like pieces on a chessboard. That's why he and Glennall had been given the visions—so they could rise through the ranks at Alexx's, at the prison camp, and with the king. Now Glennall had all the power he could ever want, and he would use it to get back at his brothers. The Unseen One had made it all possible in order to "set things right" (as Glennall had kept saying).

"It's all part of the mystery," Dilliam explained when James brought up his confusion. "The purposes of the Unseen One are being realized even while Glennall pursues his own purposes. They seem to be intertwined, and yet they're not. Not as we think. Ultimately, the purposes of the Unseen One will overcome all other purposes, to the extent that, in the end, we may look back and think that all we said and did was according to His plan all along, like actors in a play."

James shook his head. "It makes no sense to me."

Dilliam smiled. "Nor to me. But such is the tension between our purposes and His. All we can hope to do is to fulfill our roles to the best of our abilities."

"What role am I playing?" James asked.

Dilliam gazed at James intently. "I believe you are the hinge on which the door swings."

“What?”

“You will make it possible for the people to be saved.”

“I don’t get it,” James confessed. “How?”

Dilliam held up a cautioning hand. “You’ll know when it happens.”

James frowned. “Do they teach you guys how to be mysterious in a school somewhere? Why can’t everyone just come right out and say what they mean?”

Dilliam laughed heartily. The walls seemed to shake from it. Then he replied, “Because we don’t know the full answers ourselves. If all I have is a distant picture, a distant picture is all I can describe to you.”

James pondered Dilliam’s words in the days and weeks that followed. Summer turned to autumn, and the world began to change outside the walls of the shelter. The trouble began.

James noticed it first in the growing number of beggars who stopped by the shelter for food or a place to sleep. Where before they had only one or two a week, that increased to several a day, and then more.

Some of the beggars told sad stories of how their businesses had gone bust. The nation’s money was running out, they said, because the rich leaders had spent it on bad ideas. People were slowly being driven out of their jobs and then their homes. James had heard also that the Connam family had had to close down some of the mills and mines because times were so bad. He shuddered as he remembered how the same things had happened in his world as a trigger for the Depression.

James heard stories about Palatia, too. The beggars told how King Akvych had found a shrewd young man called Glenn who was leading their country into prosperity. Some said they thought he had the magic of telling the future, as if he *knew* the crisis was coming. He was forcing the people of Palatia to ration their provisions, creating laws to make them put some of it aside in royal storehouses. This was a scandal, since the Palatians didn’t think the economic problems in other countries would ever reach them. But the king insisted, even bringing out his army to enforce the law.

Then, in the middle of the harvest, a blight attacked the crops. It was a disease no one had ever seen before. All the crops simply dried up and died, turning to a brittle dust that

blew away in the slightest breeze. The rumor was that it had begun in the north, in the country of Albany, then spread west into Adria, then south into Gotthard and Marus and onward into Palatia.

Things went from bad to worse when a plague hit the livestock. It reminded James of rabies, though no one in Marus had ever heard of such a thing. No animals were excluded, and those that didn't die were so diseased as to be useless for food. People who dared to eat the meat wound up getting the disease themselves.

Fish seemed to be the only thing left to eat, but there weren't enough in the streams and rivers to feed all the people. Territorial wars broke out on the Androclyne Sea, which formed the eastern borders of Albany, Marus, and Palatia, as each country fought for what fish could be found there.

To everyone's horror, the fish, though healthy enough, began to make people ill with terrible stomach cramps. Some people died.

Many of the older people in Marus said it was the Great Catastrophe all over again. "It is the wrath of the Unseen One!" they cried. They prayed as they had never prayed before. Panic seized the surrounding countries. People began to starve.

The shelter itself seemed untouched by the problems. The brothers had always been self-sufficient, and, since their livestock didn't get sick and their fruit and vegetables grew without disease, they could continue as before. Brother Dilliam declared that it was the mercy of the Unseen One that saved them, and that His mercy should not go unshared. So the brothers all agreed to ration the food to themselves so there would be more to give to the poor and hungry who came to them.

One day in early October, the bell for the door rang once again. No one else was about, so James rushed to answer it.

"Please, sir—" a young woman began, then stopped herself with a sharp gasp, her eyes big as saucers. "You!"

"Fantya?" James exclaimed.

Without hesitation, they embraced like long-lost friends.

"I thought you were gone forever," she said. "A slave . . . or perhaps dead!"

James gestured for her to come inside. “Please. We have food.”

“I’m not a beggar,” she said proudly.

“I didn’t say you were,” James countered. But he noticed her thin face, protruding cheekbones, and recessed, dark eyes beneath the dark hair that still spread wildly from her head. Her peasant dress was also the same, but it looked the worse for wear. Her family had been affected by the hard times. But James still thought she was the prettiest girl he’d ever seen. “I’m asking you to come in as my guest. Where are your mother and father?”

“My father is in Dremat, seeking what little business he can find.”

“And your mother?”

“She is dead,” the girl replied in a flat tone.

“I’m sorry.”

“She was never in the best of health. And these times are so . . . so difficult . . . that she didn’t have the strength to survive.”

“Come in.” James took her arm and led her into the shelter. As they walked to the kitchen, he asked, “What are you doing up here if your father is Dremat?”

“He has asked me to find Nosz.”

“Nosz! Here?”

“He still does business with Connam’s sons—mostly with Sesta. We were told he was on the mountain even now.”

“Why in the world would you want to talk to him?”

“Because, though we’re not starving now, we will starve. My father wants to beg Nosz’s help to find business with the Connam family. We have nothing left. It’s our only hope.”

“You’re Palatians,” James said in obvious confusion. “I thought everyone in Palatia was doing well because of the king’s man.”

“Glenn?” she suddenly spat. “Glenn is no friend to the people of Palatia. Oh, he was helpful at first, but now he’s using the hard times to profit the king.”

“What do you mean?”

“He announced that he would ration back to us the food and provisions he has been keeping in store—in exchange for our land and property.”

“Glenn is using the crisis to buy up real estate?”

“He’s a clever young man,” Fantya said with a scowl. “Buy it all up now, and then when the crisis is over, the king will own everything. Those who give in will become nothing more than tenant farmers.”

“But that isn’t why he was put in charge!” James complained. “He was put in charge to *help* the people, not use their starvation against them! What in the world is he thinking?”

“You speak as if you know him.”

James bit his tongue. “I . . . I just don’t like what he’s doing, that’s all.”

They had reached the kitchen now, and James set about fixing food for her. One of the brothers spied them coming and raced away. James suspected he would rush to Brother Dilliam to say that a pretty girl had entered the shelter and was in James’s company.

James assembled some fruit and vegetables. Fantya restrained herself as best as she could, but her hands quivered while she ate. James wondered how long it had been since she’d had her last meal. His heart went out to her.

“Tell me about what happened to you,” she asked James between bites.

James told her his story, but in a way that made it sound as if he’d somehow escaped from Palatia and taken refuge in the shelter. He didn’t want her to know that Glennall and Glenn were the same person, nor that he had connections to the king himself. All his instincts said that it would cause trouble for her to know.

Brother Dilliam arrived shortly thereafter, but he never betrayed any concern about James being with this attractive young woman. Instead, he played the perfect host, offering Fantya all the hospitality the shelter could afford. Fantya politely refused. “I must return to my father,” she insisted.

“Find him and come back,” James offered. “You’ll be safe here.”

“No. We are Palatians first and foremost. We must make our own way.”

James walked with her to the door. An evening chill had come. Dark clouds gathered overhead. James thought he felt a drop of rain on his cheek. Fantya drew her arms around herself, then suddenly leaned over and kissed James on the cheek. “Thank you for your kindness,” she said warmly.

“Don’t go to Nosz,” James pleaded with her. “Don’t make any deals with him. He’s a nasty man. Brother Dilliam knows Connam personally. He can put in a good word for you.”

Fantya replied gently, “I will speak with my father. But I can make no promises of what we’ll do.”

James needed more reassurance from her than that and put his hand on her arm to stop her from leaving. She looked him full in the face with her dark eyes. They defied him. Her pride would not allow her to accept anything else from him.

“Good-bye,” she said and stepped onto the path outside the door.

The rain began to fall steadily. James watched her until she had become part of the rain and the forest itself. He felt sick at heart. *Why am I here?* he wondered. *I’m not helping anyone by hiding in this shelter.*

Brother Dilliam placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Close the door,” he said. “When next we open it, we will open other things as well.”



"Why don't I dream anymore?" James asked Dilliam the next morning. They were in the courtyard, clearing up the leaves that had blown in with the previous night's storm.

"You don't dream?"

"I don't have dreams like I did before—you know, dreams that show me things."

"I can't answer that question with any certainty. The Unseen One will do as He pleases," came the reply. "But you have to remember that dreams are not an end unto themselves. They're merely a *means* to an end. It's by the touch of dreams that the Unseen One nudges us in the direction He would like us to go. If you're no longer having dreams, perhaps it is because you are on the right path."

The bell for the door jingled somewhere overhead. Brother Jessup seemed to appear from nowhere and rushed to answer it. The visitor was a messenger from Connam. He wanted to speak with Brother Dilliam immediately.

"You will accompany me," Dilliam informed James.

Soon thereafter, they began their journey farther up the mountain to Connam's home. It was at least a two-hour walk, even longer this day because the path was slick with mud from the rain. After a while, James asked, "You knew this would happen, didn't you?"

Dilliam tilted his head slightly. "You may not be dreaming anymore, but I am."

"You dreamed that we would be called to Connam?"

"I dreamed that Connam would summon me, but I saw in my dream that you were to come with me. You're to accompany me wherever I go."

"But—"

"No questions, my son," Dilliam interrupted. "Let's

discover the answers together."

Connam's home was a castle, plain and simple. It had a moat surrounding it and a drawbridge, towers, and turrets—all the things James would have expected to see on a castle. As they approached, Dilliam informed him that it had been built generations before on the very site where the noble Arin had once lived with his family, right after the Great Catastrophe.

Servants were hustling and bustling in the courtyard, on the terraces, and up and down the many corridors.

"Why the frenzied activity?" Dilliam asked one young servant.

The servant looked around quickly to make sure he wasn't being watched or overheard. "We are packing to leave. But ask me no more, sir," he replied and rushed off.

Connam was in his chamber, a large, simply furnished room. Colorful tapestries hung on the walls, but the rest of the room was made up of modest wooden tables and chairs. A large square table occupied the middle of the room. Connam sat there, papers and scrolls, pens and inkwells spread out before him.

If this is where Glennall grew up, James thought, *I now understand why he thought the houses of Palatia were so gaudy*.

Connam stood up to welcome them. He was nearly as tall as Dilliam but looked older and frailer. He embraced Dilliam warmly, then hooked a shriveled thumb at James.

"Who is he?" the old man asked in a low, croaky voice.

"My apprentice," Dilliam replied.

Connam didn't look at James or pay much attention to him throughout the rest of the conversation. "You see the chaos of my house?" he asked, gesturing for Dilliam to sit down. James drifted over to a large stone fireplace where a fire raged. The warmth of it was a comfort.

"Yes, my lord, I noticed the chaos," Dilliam answered.

"We are packing to go down the mountain."

"Who, my lord?"

"My entire family."

"Are times so bad for you?"

"Not yet, but they will be if we continue on our present course." Connam coughed, then continued. "We will all go to our family home near the Valley of the Rocks. I will wait there."

"Wait, my lord?" Dilliam inquired. "Wait for what?"

"For news of the success or failure of my sons' mission."

"You speak cryptically, my lord. I am a foolish man and do not understand."

"You are no fool," Connam stated, rapping a knuckle on the table to emphasize the statement. "All the families of Marus have asked me to go to Palatia to negotiate with the king's adviser."

"Glenn?"

"Yes. But I am too feeble to negotiate, so I am sending my sons—except the youngest—to negotiate on our behalf."

"What will you negotiate?"

"A treaty for food and supplies for our people."

Dilliam was surprised. "But you know the king's terms. He will only give food in exchange for land."

"Then we will give him land."

Dilliam's eyes widened. "You're prepared to give the king of Palatia access to the lands of Marus?"

"The land is no good to us if we starve to death," Connam replied, a hint of resignation in his voice.

"This is sobering news, my lord."

"So it is," Connam agreed. "But in the collective wisdom of the rulers of the nation, we could think of nothing else, no other action to take. Unless *you* can think of something. What would the Unseen One have us do?"

"I'm afraid the Unseen One has not advised me on the subject," Dilliam answered directly. "Humbly, though, while I can't affirm the decision to give Marutian lands to King Akvych, I *can* affirm your decision to have your sons meet with the king's adviser."

Has Dilliam lost his mind? James wondered. *To send Connam's sons to Glennall would put them right into his hopes for revenge. He might have them imprisoned on some ridiculous excuse: a charge of treason, spying,* anything—*or he might even have them killed.* James nearly spoke, the words catching in his throat as he stopped them. It sounded like a cough.

Dilliam shot him a warning glance.

"I'm glad you approve," Connam said, "because you're going with them."

"My lord?"

"I want you to go with my sons to Palatia."

"For what purpose, my lord?"

“To advise them.” The old man took a deep breath, then leaned on his desk. “I have been a man of faith, as you know. I could fill the night telling of the adventures I have had with the Unseen One. Yet, at times I have behaved as if the Unseen One did not exist. It was the price of my success, I believe. Prosperity filled my purse while it robbed my soul.”

“It is the way of men, my lord.”

“So it is.” Connam’s eyes grew moist. “My beloved Glennall was the only one who sought the ways of the Unseen One. You taught him yourself.”

“He was gifted, my lord.”

“But I did not cherish his gifts as I should have. I didn’t want him to grow up to be a priest. I wanted him to grow up to be a successful man of business. Like me. That was my heart’s desire.” Connam paused and wiped his eyes. “Now I would allow him to be anything, anything at all, if the Unseen One would return him to me alive.” There was silence for a moment.

James kept his eyes away from the scene and stared at the yellow and red of the fire.

“We leave at daybreak, Dilliam. Make whatever plans you must through my servants. They will return to your shelter to gather whatever you need.”

“I have few needs, my lord.”

“Good.”

“With your permission, I will bring my apprentice along. He is of great comfort to me.”

“As you wish. My head steward will show you where you will sleep tonight. In the meantime, my home is your home. I may have need of your counsel later.”

Dilliam signaled James that it was time to go and stood up. “I am at your service, my lord,” he offered in parting. They left the room.

In the corridor, James opened his mouth to speak.

Dilliam held up a finger for him to stay silent. “No questions,” he instructed.

The head steward approached and guided them to two rooms down a dark hallway in a quieter part of the castle. Dilliam drew up a list of things he wanted the servants to bring from the shelter, and he also gave them a note for Brother Jessup to explain what had happened.

James spent the rest of the day wandering around the

castle, staying out of the servants' way, and trying to imagine what it was like for Glennall to grow up there. He visualized how difficult it must have been for Glennall to be so sickly and frail while his brothers were so strong and robust. On the other hand, it must have been galling for his brothers to have to play second fiddle to a weedy younger brother. And meanwhile, their father was oblivious to the hatred being bred between them, a hatred that would lead to betrayal and now maybe revenge.

As evening came, James had lost his way down one hallway and into a small corridor that led to several rooms. Frustrated that he didn't know where he was going, he paused at an open door to ask for help. He heard voices inside and waited for a moment to speak.

"You will obey me, my son!" It was Connam, his voice croaky but still commanding.

"I am humiliated," a young man replied. James guessed it was Transe, Glennall's younger brother, by their facial resemblance. "You allow all my brothers to go to Palatia but require me to stay with you. Will I never be able to cut your apron strings?"

"I will not lose you as I lost Glennall!" Connam insisted.

James didn't want to eavesdrop or be an unwelcome witness to their argument, so he quietly stepped away. It was too late.

"Why do you linger at my door?" Transe shouted.

James hadn't realized he'd been seen and stepped into the doorway, blushing. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I lost my way and was trying to—"

"Who are you?" Transe demanded.

James was startled by Transe's anger and even more startled by Transe's appearance. He looked so much like Glennall that it took James's breath away.

"He is Brother Dilliam's apprentice," Connam explained. "He's harmless."

Transe's tone softened. "I apologize for shouting at you. I'm sure one of the servants will help you if you go down the hall and turn left."

"Thank you," James replied and made to leave.

"Please close the door," Transe said.

James obeyed. As soon as the latch clicked, the shouting on the other side of the door resumed, with Connam pleading

with his son to try to understand.

The entire family gathered in the castle's great hall for their evening meal. James finally got a closer look at the brothers he had seen only as ruffians that night at Arinshill Mine. It seemed like such a long time ago. But there they were, sitting on both sides of the table, eating bowls of a stew of some sort—a stew with more broth than meat or vegetables in it.

Sesta was clearly alarmed to see James and Dilliam there. He demanded to know why they had been joined by two *priests*, but Connam was firm in his answer and unyielding to any of Sesta's arguments. James was aware that Sesta watched him out of the corner of his eye for the rest of the meal.

James also recognized Rastall, the biggest and oldest, as the brother who didn't want Glennall killed. Drouse, a younger brother James recognized, also sided with Rastall at the mine. Besides Sesta and Transe (who pouted the entire night), the remaining seven men weren't familiar to James. They had been mostly shadows that night in his dream. And no matter how hard he tried during dinner, he couldn't match their names to their faces.

"Rastall is the oldest," Dilliam explained as they walked to their rooms much later.

"I know him."

"Then comes Sesta."

"I know him best of all."

Dilliam chuckled. "He must be wondering why you haven't told Connam what you know. It must be torture for him, though I'm sure he has come up with a ready means to denounce you if you ever speak against him."

"Which one is going bald?"

"That would be Turnan. And then there's Drouse."

"I recognized him."

"Then comes Naud, who had the scar on his cheek."

"Right."

"Followed by Yon. He wore the gold coat. He always wears gold coats."

"Okay."

"Then comes Cannap. He's the shortest of them all."

"Cannap is short. Got it."

"Then Fortawince, Pa'an, and Selsond."

“I’ll never remember them.”

“You probably won’t have to.”

James fell asleep while quizzing himself on the names of the brothers. He slept fitfully but figured it was because the castle was colder than he was used to.

The next morning, the horses and wagons were assembled in the courtyard, and everyone climbed on. Connam asked Brother Dilliam to say a prayer to the Unseen One, asking for a safe journey and successful visit to Palatia. Afterward, the procession slowly made its way from the castle and down the winding roads of the mountain.

It took three days to reach the family home near the village of Kellen, a little north of the Valley of the Rocks. Along the way, James saw multitudes of people heading toward Palatia. Most were thin and sick. They cleared the road for Connam’s caravan, begging for food and water once they realized who was passing them. Dilliam and James gave what they could, but they were soundly rebuked by some of the brothers for giving away what wasn’t their property.

Dilliam turned on the brothers and shouted, “Are you still not humbled by your lives and this downturn of your fortunes? Whatever you have, you have only because of the grace of the Unseen One. So do not rebuke me like selfish little boys.”

None of the men spoke to him after that.

At Kellen, the wagons were unpacked, then reorganized for the next part of the journey to Muirk. Two brothers would drive each wagon, with Dilliam and James driving the smallest supply wagon in the rear. Great tension filled the air as the brothers argued over how to negotiate with Glenn. Some had resigned themselves to giving up most of their lands for food, while others wanted to drive a hard bargain in the hopes of getting the food without losing *any* lands.

It took another day to prepare for the trip to Muirk. When the drivers snapped the reins and the wagons lurched forward, James felt butterflies dancing in his stomach. He felt like an actor about to go on stage for the first time.

He sensed that the time had come for him to play his most-important part.



Muirk was overrun with people. The streets were congested on all sides with travelers from every nation. The mix of voices and accents was a cacophony to James. The stench from so many animals and inadequate sanitation filled the air. The caravan seemed to move only inches at a time down the long avenue to the king's palace.

James felt a strange longing in his heart at the familiarity of this place. The memories came back to him of running errands for Glennall when they were in Alexx's household. But it was a clash of feelings, for he knew those streets as a slave, and he never wanted to be a slave again.

From his position on the wagon, James heard the name of Glenn spoken or whispered fearfully and apprehensively. And the closer they got to the king's palace, the more he dreaded what might happen. He didn't know who Glennall had become in the short time since they'd separated, but he figured he wouldn't like him.

The walls of the palace were in sight when Rastall commanded the caravan to pull to one side of the road. Sesta then leaped down from his wagon and disappeared into a tavern. A minute later, he returned with a large, barrel-chested man with a thick, dark beard.

"Nosz," James whispered to Dilliam.

Dilliam nodded apprehensively. "Will he recognize you?" he asked.

"I hope he does. I'd like to see the expression on his face."

"In the tavern," Nosz called to them. "I can give you news, but not here in the street."

The brothers, along with Dilliam and James, crowded into the small establishment. It had low beams that Dilliam

knocked his head against once or twice. They found a long table and sat down. Nosz stood at the head of the table to address them.

He began, “I am gratified that you have entrusted me to __”

“Save your speeches for a banquet,” Rastall commanded. “Have you met with Glenn on our behalf?”

Nosz lowered his head. “Not as such, no.”

This caused an uproar among the brothers, who demanded an explanation.

“These things take time,” Nosz tried to explain. As he spoke, his glance fell on James’s face. He looked puzzled for a moment, as if he should know him from somewhere but couldn’t remember where. He continued, “But I am pleased to say that I have an audience with Glenn *this afternoon*. I will not disappoint you.”

“You’d better not.” Sesta sneered.

“Meanwhile, you must remain here while I go,” Nosz explained. “The accommodations are the best you’ll find, under the circumstances.” He moved around the table, quickly shaking the hands of the brothers as he went. When he reached Dilliam and James, he stopped.

“Do I know you, boy?” he asked softly.

“What did you do with Fantya?” James asked.

The question had its intended effect. Nosz looked as if someone had suddenly hit him with a club. He stammered for a moment, but no sensible words came. Finally he managed to say, “I have not seen her or her father.”

Dilliam hooked a finger into the edge of Nosz’s vest and pulled him close. “Do not lie to us,” he whispered. “She went to see you. What became of her?”

“I swear,” he whispered back, his eyes darting nervously to the brothers. “She never came to me. I haven’t seen her in months. Please, I must go to the palace.” He wrenched free from Dilliam and left the tavern quickly without looking back.

James turned to Dilliam. “Do you believe him?” he asked.

“Yes, I do.”

James breathed a sigh of relief. “Maybe she found another way to get help. As long as she stayed away from him, I’m happy.”

They all waited at the tavern for the next two hours.

The brothers continued to debate how they would approach Glenn. They also speculated about the man himself.

"They say he's wily and shrewd," said Naud, the one with the scar on his cheek.

"He'd have to be to rise to the top the way he has," Turnan observed. "He's been ruthless."

Fortawince added, "He didn't start out that way. Do you remember? We all thought that his forced rationing, before all the trouble started, was absurd. Now, of course, we see that he was a genius."

"Or a prophet," Rastall suggested moodily.

"A Palatian prophet?" Naud scoffed.

"What makes you think he's Palatian?" Rastall challenged. "I've heard a lot of rumors, and one describes him as a foreigner. He may be from Marus, for all we know."

"Or a fanatic from the Unseen One," Sesta proposed, giving James and Dilliam a cold look.

Cannap stood up and moved down the table toward them. "A worthy thought. What do *our* prophets of the Unseen One think about Glenn?"

Dilliam thought for a moment, then replied, "He's a man, no more or less. A gifted man, to be sure, but no more than a man."

Cannap pointed a finger at James. "What do you say, boy? We've all noticed your eyes. We know what the legends say about your kind. Prophesy for us!" He laughed.

"Leave him alone!" Sesta snapped. "Don't taunt him. Don't even talk to him. He's trouble for us. He's a bad omen."

Dilliam gazed at Sesta and asked, "Is this what you've become, Sesta? Have you turned from faith to superstition?"

"If it were up to me, you wouldn't be here," Sesta answered. "I would have left both of you in Marus."

The tavern door opened, and all eyes turned expectantly. It wasn't Nosz, and the brothers relaxed. James didn't relax, though. He knew who had entered. It was Barric.

Barric saw James as well and showed only the smallest hint of surprise. He winked at him with a friendly smile and then strode into the center of the tavern. He announced formally, "Gentlemen, I come on behalf of the esteemed Glenn."

The brothers all sat up and took notice.

"You? Where's Nosz?" Sesta asked.

"Sadly, Nosz cannot help you."

"Why not?" Sesta demanded, rising from his seat.

"Because he has been arrested," Barric replied. "Unfortunately for him, the esteemed Glenn recognized him as a well-known spy, as well as a slave trader and scoundrel."

Revenge, James thought. Glennall must have recognized who Nosz was. James then wondered about Fantya and hoped —*believed*—that she and her father were all right somewhere.

"We pray the esteemed Glenn will not hold Nosz's deeds against us," Drouse said quickly. James noticed that no one actually defended Nosz.

Barric didn't respond to that but said, "Glenn would like to meet with you. He knows well the House of Connam and believes you have much to discuss."

The brothers were pleased with the news. The butterflies began to dance in James's stomach again.

"When may we meet with Glenn?" Rastall asked.

"Right now," Barric said. "You are to follow me to the palace."

"Now?" Rastall asked, suddenly dusting at his clothes. "We would prefer to be dressed more suitably for an audience with the king's adviser."

"Your appearance is of no consequence to him," Barric said. "He wants to see you now."

They quickly returned to their wagons. Barric led the way down the main street to the front gates that James remembered so well. Rather than going up the main driveway to the front door, though, they were taken on a different driveway that went around to the right of the palace. James wondered if they would have to go in through the servants' entrance.

They did.

"The servants' entrance?" Sesta complained as they all climbed down from the wagons. "What indignation is this?"

Barric was unfazed. "The king is meeting various heads of state in the front hall. Besides, this is the fastest way to Glenn's reception room."

The reception room seemed like a smaller version of the king's Throne Room. It had chairs lined up, facing one another, with a larger chair on a platform at the end. A red canopy stood over the chair, as if keeping away a sun that never entered the room. The brothers all chose their seats.

Dilliam and James stood near the back to watch the proceedings. Barric waited by the main door.

Only a minute or so after they'd arrived, a door behind the platform opened, and a young man walked in. Without looking at them, he went directly to the chair on the podium and sat down. James's heart skipped a beat. It was Glennall, without doubt, but his hair was longer and curly, and he had a full beard. James thought that his brothers *must* recognize him. But with his hair and beard and robes of state and the way he sat in the shadow created by the canopy, his features were obscured. James knew his brothers didn't recognize him at all. Besides, their long-lost brother was the *last* person they would have expected to see in the palace.

He was unsmiling and stern in his tone. "I have met with your representative and dealt with him accordingly," he announced. "You should choose your comrades more carefully."

Rastall stood up nervously. "My lord, do not hold it against us," he pleaded. "We have known the man in business only and know nothing of his character."

"Oh?" Glennall challenged. "Can one engage a person in business without knowing that person's character? Surely how one conducts his business reveals his character. Unless, of course, you *choose* to be blind to that person's character."

He's toying with them, James thought.

"My lord speaks wisely," Rastall said diplomatically. "We will be wiser ourselves in the future."

"Who are you, and what do you want from me?" Glennall asked as if suddenly bored with their conversation.

"We are the sons of Connam, a great man of Marus, whom I am sure you know of."

"Why should I know of him?"

"Because he's the most powerful man in our country."

"If he's so powerful, why has he sent you to me?"

"That we may speak business with you."

"Business? Am I to believe that the great and powerful Connam of Marus needs to speak business with me? More likely he has sent you to *spy* on Palatia."

"No, my lord!"

"He wants you to search out any weakness that may have been caused by the plagues and famine. Why else would he send so many of you?"

"No, my lord, it isn't so! If anything, we are here to show you *our* weakness by negotiating for food. Connam acknowledges your wisdom in these times of trouble. He has the highest respect for all you have done for Palatia. His hope was to honor you by sending not only one representative but all of his sons to stand before you."

"*All* of his sons? I had heard that Connam has *12* sons, yet I see only 10 of you here."

"It's true, my lord, we were 12. But one of our beloved brothers was tragically killed by a wild animal. And the other, our youngest, has remained at home with our father for safety's sake."

"Safety's sake? Was the journey so perilous? Do you fear Palatian outlaws?"

"No, my lord. I confess that our father is old and frail and fears unnecessarily that his youngest son may die tragically just as our other brother died."

Glennall stood up and said impatiently, "This is nothing but double-talk and lies! You say one thing, and yet the truth is another. You say your father wishes to honor me by sending *all* of his sons, and yet he withholds one. You are spies!"

The rest of the brothers could no longer restrain themselves. They each cried out that they were not spies. Two guards stepped forward, positioning themselves on each side of Glennall's platform. *It's all part of his revenge*, James knew. *Is this what he had planned all this time, or is he making it up as he goes along?*

Glennall sat down again and spoke calmly. "Then allow me to test the truth of your words. One of you may return to Marus to bring me the missing brother."

"My father will never permit it," Rastall argued sharply.

Glennall seemed aghast. "Will he save one son and risk losing 10 others?"

"What do you mean?" Sesta suddenly asked.

"The rest of you will be my personal guests in the royal dungeon until the missing brother is brought to me. You have a minute to decide." Glennall stood up again and disappeared through the rear door.

In a collective shout, the brothers began to argue with each other about what to do.

During the argument, James glanced at Dilliam. "He's got a lot of nerve," James said. "He knows I could expose him

right now."

"To what end?" Dilliam asked. "He has the upper hand. You cannot challenge his power. It's his *heart* that must be challenged."

"Then what should we do?"

Dilliam shrugged. "We must be patient to see how this plays out."

Glennall returned after precisely one minute and stood in front of his chair.

The brothers conceded their defeat and decided that Selsond should be the one to ride to Marus, since he was the best horseman, and bring Transe back.

Satisfied, Glennall ordered, "Barric, see them safely conducted to the dungeon." Then he pointed to James and Dilliam. "But not them. They do not have to join these spies. They are free to go."

Dilliam stood up straight, his hands clasped in front of him, and said, "My lord, I was entrusted by Connam himself to accompany these men *wherever* they go. If they are to stay in the dungeon, then we must stay in the dungeon as well."

James smiled to himself. Dilliam was pushing to see just how far Glennall would go.

"Suit yourself," Glennall said, then walked out.

The guards led them down various corridors to the rear of the palace, then up other corridors toward the front again. These were sections James had not seen in his short time as a palace resident. He noticed that the luxury of the palace walls and floors diminished here. Everything began to look more worn out. Then he suspected that they were being taken to the oldest section of the palace. They eventually reached a large wooden door that Barric opened, revealing a curved descending staircase.

Barric stepped aside and instructed, "Go down the stairs, please."

James and Dilliam were the last in the procession, so James asked Barric as they passed by, "It's the old tower, isn't it?"

Barric nodded. After he was sure the others couldn't hear, he inquired, "Why are you going with them? You don't have to."

"It's our duty," Dilliam replied.

"Well," Barric said with a faint smile, "you won't be

getting the full treatment. He's told me to make sure everyone is fairly comfortable."

"Do you know what he's up to?" James asked.

Barric shook his head. "He's changed since you left. He constantly surprises me these days. He has a wisdom and shrewdness beyond his years, but at times he seems like a lost child."

The dungeon was as dark and damp as a dungeon could be. But the large cell in which they were placed had been given fresh straw, several pitchers of fresh water, and even a couple of bowls of fruit.

"This isn't so bad," Yon observed as he took off his gold coat and carefully folded it over an unused trough.

"Have you lost your mind?" Sesta growled at him. "Do you really think he's ever going to let us out of here?"

"Why is he doing this?" Fortawince asked. "What does he have to gain by locking us up? Surely he knows that Father will rally all of Marus to battle for our freedom."

This comment was met with silence. It was a lie, and they all knew it. The people of Marus were in no condition to fight anyone, least of all Palatia.

"What do you make of this?" Drouse asked Dilliam.

"It's not for me to say," he answered.

"It is if we ask you!" Sesta shouted angrily.

Dilliam was unaffected by Sesta's outburst. He said, "You must search your own hearts. Is there something to be learned from this trouble?"

"Are you saying the Unseen One is responsible for this?" Cannap asked.

"Maybe He is and maybe He isn't," Dilliam said. "Sometimes we can't tell until *afterward*."

"After we're dead, you mean," Naud replied with a wry chuckle.

Dilliam allowed silence to fill the cell again. They waited. He turned away from them with the words "Search your hearts."



The next morning, Barric came down to the dungeon. It was too soon for Selsond to have returned with Transe, so James knew something else was about to happen.

"The esteemed Glenn wants to meet with you," he announced.

They were taken back to the reception room. No sooner had they sat down, with Dilliam and James standing at the back again, than Glennall entered and took his seat under the canopy.

"I have reconsidered your case," he said pleasantly. "It was unreasonable to hold all of you while your brother comes. As a show of good faith, I will hold only one of you."

The brothers reacted favorably to this news—until it dawned on them that one would have to stay behind.

Glennall continued, "To demonstrate that I am not a harsh man, I will also send a gift to your father."

"A gift, my lord?" Rastall asked, surprised.

"Yes," Glennall said with a dramatic sweep of his hand. "I will send a gift of grain with you. Give it to your father with my compliments. And bring your youngest brother to me."

"What kind of game is he playing?" James whispered to Dilliam.

Dilliam shrugged.

"Now," Glennall stood up and pointed to Sesta, "I want *you* to stay while your other brothers go."

"Me, my lord?" Sesta asked, his expression pained.

"Yes." Glennall gestured to Barric and then strode out of the room.

"I will take you to your wagons, which we have brought from the tavern and loaded with grain," Barric stated, then

waved to the guards. They walked over to Sesta to take him away.

"Wait!" Dilliam called out. Everyone stopped to hear him. "My apprentice and I will also stay with Sesta."

Barric looked slightly bemused. "If you wish," he agreed.

Dilliam and James went to Sesta's side, and they all left together.

Once they were secure in the dungeon again, Sesta turned on Dilliam and James. His face was flushed, and his eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets. "He's punishing me, isn't he?" he cried.

"What do you mean?" Dilliam asked.

Sesta began to pace, wringing his hands frantically. "Somehow he knows what happened to Glennall! You told him. Or the Unseen One told him. And he's punishing me for it."

"You'll have to explain yourself," Dilliam said.

Sesta picked up a bowl of fruit and threw it at Dilliam. Dilliam ducked aside. "Don't play your games with me!" Sesta thundered. "I'm sure the boy has told you what he saw! He knows what really happened to Glennall! In fact, he knows more than *I* do! What happened, boy? How did Glennall die? As a slave in some terrible Palatian camp?" Sesta began to weep uncontrollably. "Is that how it happened? Is that why I'm being punished now?"

Dilliam crossed the cell and put his huge arms around Sesta. Sesta stayed there a moment, like a small, lost boy, then suddenly pushed Dilliam away.

"No, no!" he cried. "It's too late for that! I don't deserve comfort. I want to feel the full penalty of what I've done." He went to the corner of the cell and slid into it, curled himself into a small ball, and began to rock from side to side. He stayed there, alternately weeping and rocking, for the next two days.



On the morning of their third day in the dungeon, Barric

brought word that the brothers had returned with Transe.

Sesta stood up stiffly and left the cell without a word.

Barric held up his hand to stop James. “He sees it all, you know,” he whispered.

“Glennall’s been watching us in this dungeon?”

Barric nodded. “He’s very confused. He’s been having terrible, blinding headaches. I wish you’d speak to him now. I’m afraid he’s about to crack up.”

James looked to Dilliam. Dilliam looked away.

“Not yet,” James said.

The brothers and Transe were in Glennall’s reception room when Sesta, James, and Dilliam arrived. Once again the brothers took their seats while Dilliam and James stood at the back.

“We had to beg Father to let Transe go,” Selsond told Sesta. “He says this whole thing is a curse. I thought watching us leave would kill him.”

Drouse added, “If anything happens to Transe, it *will* kill him.”

“I’ll die first,” Sesta said softly.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Yon argued. “We’ve done what Glenn wants, and we got three wagons-full of grain in the bargain. It’ll be all right now.”

“No. It isn’t that easy,” Sesta insisted, his eyes tearing up again.

Rastall put a hand on Sesta’s shoulder. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Sesta quickly beckoned his brothers together. They leaned forward like men in a huddle. “This is justice,” he informed them. “This is our penalty for what we did to Glennall.”

Some of the brothers gasped, some put their hands over their mouths, and Turnan hissed, “Keep your mouth shut, you fool!”

Transe looked confused. “Glennall?” he questioned. “What about Glennall?”

The door behind the platform opened just then, and Glennall entered and sat once again in the shadow of his canopy. Barric stood off to one side, watching them all carefully. Two guards were positioned near the doors.

Rastall stepped forward, his arm around Transe, and announced, “This is our youngest brother, my lord, as you

requested."

Glennall stayed perfectly still. He didn't speak. It was hard for James to see what he was doing or what kind of expression he had on his face. When he finally spoke, he sounded hoarse, as if he had a cold. "I see" was all he said. He cleared his throat.

"Our father sends his gratitude for your gift of grain and hopes you may now be assured of our good intentions," Rastall continued. "With your permission, we would like to negotiate the purchase of more grain for our people."

Glennall suddenly clapped his hands together. "Negotiate we will! Let's adjourn to my private dining chamber, where we will eat and discuss our business." He stood up and left.

Barric opened the door and invited them all to follow him.

"Is that it?" James asked Dilliam. "Was that his revenge?"

Dilliam looked bewildered. "I honestly don't know," he replied.

The curtains in the dining chamber were drawn so that the room was dark. Candles were lit in holders on the wall and in the center of the table. *Another way to disguise himself,* James thought.

Glennall sat at the head of the table, with 13 settings of silver plates, cups, and cutlery for the rest of them. He insisted that Transe sit next to him. James, who was certain that Glennall was purposefully ignoring him, made it a point to sit at the opposite end from Glennall, along with Dilliam.

Glennall and Rastall talked business, with occasional interjections from some of the other brothers. They negotiated a cash price for the grain, much to James's surprise. Glennall never brought up the idea of food in exchange for land. James also noticed that Glennall asked a lot of questions about the family, especially Connam's health, and paid close attention to Transe, making sure he had plenty of food and drink.

No one but James and Dilliam seemed to notice Sesta. He sat quietly at his place, nibbling at his food, staring at the table in front of him.

When the meal had ended, Glennall stood up and closed a large ledger in which he'd been making notes. "I must go now," he said as if he were sorry to leave them. "Barric will

show you to our royal treasurer to pay for the grain you wish to buy. I wish you well in your journey." With that said, he left the room.

The brothers looked at one another. They were mystified by this strange turn of events. To have gone from the dungeon to Glenn's favor seemed more than they could have hoped for.

"You see, Sesta?" Cannap said jovially, clapping his brother on the back. "The crisis is over."

Sesta didn't reply.

James wondered if it really was over and done with. After all this time hoping and praying for revenge, was Glennall really going to let them go? It didn't seem possible. And yet Barric had said that Glennall seemed terribly confused. Maybe he truly was heading for a breakdown.

"Or," Dilliam offered as they got into their wagon outside the palace door, "maybe he had the change of heart we have been praying for."

As they urged the horses on, James couldn't help but feel a sense of disappointment. He had thought he had a role to play. He had thought his presence was needed. Apparently he had been wrong.

The guard at the front gate of the palace called the convoy to a halt.

"Is something wrong?" Rastall asked him.

"We've been told to search your wagons," the guard answered.

Suddenly they were surrounded by palace guards. Then Chalcer, looking as dignified and threatening as ever, stepped from the guardhouse. He walked past James without looking at him, circled around the back of the wagons, and moved up the other side. He stopped next to Transe.

"What do you have in that bag?" he asked Transe.

"Which bag?" Transe asked with a nervous chuckle. "The wagons are full of bags of grain."

"The bag at your feet," Chalcer specified.

Transe looked down and picked up a satchel. "This isn't my bag," he protested. "I've never seen it before."

Chalcer took the satchel and opened it up. He pulled out a silver cup, a silver plate, silver cutlery—and the large ledger Glennall had been writing in during their meal. "Is this how you show your gratitude?" Chalcer asked accusingly.

“I don’t know how those got there!” Transe said, his voice rising in tandem with his panic. “It must be a joke! I didn’t take them!”

“A poor joke,” Chalcer said coldly. “Arrest him. Put him in the dungeon.”

“No!” Rastall cried and leaped from his wagon.

The guards held up their spears and muskets.

Rastall fell at Chalcer’s feet. “If you’re going to take anyone, take me,” he begged. “Please!”

“Are you confessing to this theft?” Chalcer asked.

“No, but—”

“Then this is nothing to do with you.”

Chalcer signaled the guards to take Transe to the dungeon. The boy began to weep as they dragged him away. He pleaded his innocence and begged his brothers to help him. Sesta fell to the ground and also wept, pounding his fists into the dirt.

“Punishment!” he wailed over and over.

Rastall stood up and began pacing back and forth, unsure of what to do. “This will kill our father!” he muttered. “How can I go back and face him? I gave him my word—my *word*—that we would return Transe safe and sound to him.”

“Punishment!” Sesta lamented.

The rest of the brothers sat numbly, their mouths hanging open, their expressions dulled by the shock of it all.

“I’ve had enough of his games!” James announced suddenly. He climbed off the wagon and started marching toward the palace.

“What are you doing?” Rastall shouted after him.

James didn’t answer but continued on.

“You’ll get us *all* killed!” Naud yelled.

Distantly, James thought he heard Dilliam say to them, “He’s the only one who can help you now.”



James walked around the palace to the side entrance. Barric was waiting for him there. “I saw you coming,” he said.

“Where is he?” James demanded.

“Meeting with the king’s governors. I think you should wait in his chambers.”

“I’m not waiting another minute for him,” James insisted and barreled on.

Barric followed him. “I’ll be in trouble if I let you through.”

“There’s going to be trouble if you *don’t* let me through. Which room is it?”

“The third door on the left.” Barric’s voice was receding. He had stopped where he was. “Good luck,” he encouraged.

James didn’t stop at the door but pushed it open as soon as he got to it. Glennall was sitting at a round table with six other men. They all had their heads down as they pored over ledgers and papers with their pens poised. James’s entrance caused them all to look up.

“Well, well,” Glennall said.

“We have to talk,” James responded.

“Make an appointment with my secretary.”

“*Now.*”

“I can have you arrested.”

James dug into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out an envelope. “I have a letter here with the king’s seal that says otherwise.”

A smile played at the corner of Glennall’s mouth. He was impressed. “All right.” He told the group of men, “We’ll have to continue this later.”

The men stood up and looked at James curiously as they paraded out. They were no doubt wondering how a boy

could command the king's right-hand man like that. When they were gone, James stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Are you happy now?" James asked. "Are you happy with your revenge?"

Glennall stood up and went to the window. It overlooked the front lawn of the palace. "I see my brothers are still at the front gate," he said casually.

"Only because you planted that bag of goodies on Transe and put him in the dungeon."

Glennall rubbed his forehead. A red vein stuck out, like a worm under his skin. "They've all come true. All my dreams. I have risen above my brothers."

"Big deal."

Glennall paused for a moment, then half turned to him. "You left me, James. Just when we made it to the top."

"That wasn't as important to me as it was to you."

"You still left."

"You didn't need me anymore."

"You don't know that."

"Sure I do. I couldn't stomach what you were becoming," James said angrily. "I don't pretend to know much, but I *do* know that I didn't come here from my world to help you get revenge against your brothers."

"No? Then what did you come for?" Glennall shouted.

"To stop you."

"Stop me?" Glennall asked, astonished. "What makes you think you can stop me?"

James took a step toward him. "By showing you what's going to happen if you carry on this way." James stretched out his hand toward Glennall.

Glennall retreated a step. "What are you doing?"

"You said all your dreams have come true. Now let's join hands and see what new dreams are coming."

Glennall moved to the other side of the table. "Stay away."

"Why?" James asked, still moving toward him. "You were never afraid before. Why are you afraid now?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Then take my hand. Let's see what the Unseen One wants us to see."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to." Glennall continued to move unsteadily around the table with James following him. "Besides, you know it doesn't work that way."

"But it *might* work."

"Keep away."

"Are you afraid the Unseen One will show you something you don't want to see?"

"Why should I be afraid of that?"

"Because you don't really know the Unseen One anymore. You've lost sight of the whole point."

"That's insane."

James pressed on. "I've learned a lot from Brother Dilliam over the past few months. One thing I learned is that there's a big difference between the Unseen One you told me about and the Unseen One he's told me about."

"Dilliam was my mentor," Glennall argued. He rubbed his forehead again and stumbled against a chair. They kept going around and around. "Dilliam taught me everything I know."

"Then you forgot." James inched closer to Glennall. "The Unseen One I know is about love and justice all wrapped up into one. But you got the idea that He's all about power and revenge. That's all you've talked about since I met you."

"My brothers betrayed me. It was reasonable to think the Unseen One would make things right, raising me up so I could have my revenge."

"You got it half right, Glennall. The Unseen One *is* making things right, but not the way you think, and not so you can get revenge."

"Then why?"

"Think about it. He raised us both up while we were slaves, remember? But He raised us up so we could see what mercy was all about. It was like a rehearsal for the mercy we were supposed to show later. He put you in this position to show mercy."

Glennall repeated the word numbly: "Mercy."

"What your brothers did was wrong. They meant to hurt you. But the Unseen One used their evil for a greater good. You were put in this position to show the mercy of the Unseen One just like He showed us His mercy over and over."

"I've been showing mercy," Glennall said defensively,

his conviction weakening. “Do you think any of us would be surviving this famine if I hadn’t worked it out? I’ve been showing mercy to the whole world!”

“But you’re not supposed to show it to just the whole world. You’re supposed to show it to your *brothers*, too. Don’t you see? This isn’t about revenge; it’s about mercy. It’s not about getting even; it’s about forgiveness. That’s how the Unseen One has been making it right. He’s been doing it all along.”

Glennall gazed at James with red-rimmed eyes. “Why did you leave me? You were my conscience, James. None of this would’ve happened if you’d stayed.”

“Yes, it would have. I couldn’t have stopped you then. I wasn’t strong enough. But things have changed. I understand the Unseen One better now. And I think you do, too.”

“My faith in Him never faltered,” Glennall affirmed softly.

“No, but you got confused about what He was doing. Now give me your hand.”

“My head hurts,” he said. “My headaches came back.”

“Give me your hand.”

“What will happen to me? Will the Unseen One do something to me?” His voice now reminded James of the kid he first met in the mine shaft. He sounded helpless and unsure.

James stopped their game of merry-go-round and held out his hand firmly. “You won’t know until you give me your hand, Glennall.”

Glennall also stopped where he was. “We were two halves of the same story, James,” he said sadly.

“I know.”

Glennall impulsively reached forward and took James’s hand. He had no idea what would happen, but he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was the right thing to do.

Suddenly the door opened. Chalcer looked in. “The traitors from Marus, Your Honor,” he announced.

“You brought them to me?” Glennall asked, confused.

“I received a message that you wanted to see them.”

Glennall looked at James, then down at their hands, still clasped. James wondered if somehow the Unseen One had communicated the idea to Chalcer. Why else would he bring the brothers to Glennall’s office?

“What are you going to do?” James asked Glennall.

Glennall seemed to think about it, then ordered Chalcer, “Bring them in.” He released James’s hand.

Chalcer opened the door wide, and a guard led the brothers in. They looked pale and worried but also surprised to see James standing so close to their accuser. The guard put the satchel on the table and opened it so the chalice, cutlery, and ledger could be seen.

“Bring the other one to us, the one you’ve taken to the dungeon,” Glennall commanded as he quickly turned away from the room and looked out the window.

“Yes, Your Honor,” Chalcer said and dismissed a guard to do the task.

Everyone stood silently. Glennall stayed with his back to them all and stared out the window with his hands clasped behind him. He stayed like a statue for the minutes that felt like hours. James wondered what was going through his mind.

Finally, Rastall cleared his throat and began, “Your Honor, this is a grave error—”

Glennall held up his hand for silence.

Rastall lowered his head.

Eventually the guard returned with Transe, who blinked and looked to his brothers with a bewildered expression.

“Leave us, Chalcer, and take the guard with you,” Glennall ordered, his back still turned to them all.

Chalcer looked puzzled. “But, Your Honor—”

“Leave us!” Glennall commanded more firmly.

Chalcer bowed stiffly and signaled to the guard, and they retreated, closing the door behind them.

The brothers watched Glennall with undisguised fear. Anything could happen to them now, and they knew it. Even James wasn’t entirely sure what Glennall would do next.

“My brothers,” Glennall began, and then he stopped as his voice suddenly choked with emotion. He turned to face them, the light from the window splashing onto his face. He undid his royal robe and dropped it to the floor, now standing before them in a simple tunic.

James saw the brothers shift uneasily. Sesta’s eyes grew wide, as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. In the light, with the robe gone, the great Glenn looked familiar. He looked remarkably like Glennall.

The rest of the brothers must have thought the same thing, for they also gazed wide-eyed, their mouths dropping open.

Glennall took a deep breath to control the tears that wanted to come. “My brothers, come to me!” he cried. “Look closely!”

Mystified, the brothers obeyed and moved around the table, venturing closer and closer.

“I am Glennall, your brother.”

Sesta’s eyes filled with tears, and his lips trembled. He fell to his knees at Glennall’s feet. “May the Unseen One forgive me!” he wept.

Glennall grabbed his brother’s arms and drew him to his feet. “No, brother. Do not bow, and do not reproach yourself. Though you were wrong, the Unseen One has made all things right. Embrace me and know that . . . that . . .” Glennall stammered for a moment and shot a quick glance at James. “Know that all is forgiven.”

Glennall could contain himself no longer and burst into tears, embracing Sesta and then the rest of his brothers in turn. James decided it was time to slip out of the room, to let the family have their reunion in privacy.

Dilliam was also in the hall. They smiled at each other but didn’t speak. There was nothing to say.

On the other side of the door, James could hear Glennall and his brothers weeping and talking and even laughing. Then, after the better part of an hour, Rastall came out, his face wet with tears. “I’m to fetch my father,” he said and raced off.

“I’ll go with you,” Dilliam called after Rastall. Then he told James, “My work here is done. It’s time I went home.”

“Don’t leave!” James pleaded. “Not yet.”

Dilliam approached James and lightly touched his head. “God be with you on *your* journey,” he replied in blessing.

Dilliam turned and walked down the hall. When he reached the end, he suddenly turned to face James again.

James wondered about this, but the door opened again and Glennall came out alone. “Don’t stand here, James. Come inside,” he invited. “We’re going to have a feast, a celebration.”

“I guess you’re feeling better,” James observed.

Glennall nodded. “Thank you for reminding me of what

I knew all along but had chosen to forget." He reached out and touched James's hand. "Thank you."

A bright flash of light blinded them. James winced, and Glennall cried out. The hallway disappeared around them. When their vision cleared, they found themselves standing in the middle of a field.

Glennall blinked. "Where are we?"

James looked down at his feet. There were two rows of ruts in the soft dirt, the ruts of wagon wheels. "This is my field," he realized. "This is where it started."

Glennall looked pained. "What does it mean?"

James felt his heart rise in his throat. "I think it means I'm going home."

"But you can't leave!" Glennall begged. "Your world isn't your home anymore. *This* is your world. You belong in Marus. We're going to have great adventures together."

James wanted to stay. He wanted it more than anything in his life. "I don't think the Unseen One is going to let me stay," he answered, his voice shaking.

"But you have to!" Glennall held on to James's hand. "You can't go."

James thought he remembered something. It was a scene of Glennall being embraced by his father and a ring being taken from a locked box and placed upon Glennall's finger. But it wasn't the younger Glennall; it was Glennall as he was now.

James was "remembering" something that hadn't happened yet. Time was out of joint, he realized. He was still standing in the field with Glennall.

"You can't go! This is your home now!" Glennall pleaded, as if by saying it, it would become true.

"I know," James agreed. "If I can ever come back, I will."

"But what am I going to do until then?"

A mist seemed to come from nowhere and surround them. In one direction, just over Glennall's shoulder, James could see the hallway where he and Glennall had been a few moments before. Dilliam still stood at the end of it. He seemed to be watching them.

"Brother Dilliam will help you now," James stated.

James glanced back, in the opposite direction from the hallway. A police car sat on a distant road. Two officers stood

next to it, looking at him.

"I think we're going to have to let go now," James said, his heart breaking.

The mist engulfed them.

"You'll come back," Glennall maintained, his grip on James's hand relaxing.

James knew he was about to sob, and he couldn't bear for Glennall to see it, so he opened his hand completely. The mist covered his face, thick as cotton wool.

Glennall was gone.

James stood in the middle of the field alone.

The stern voice of a policeman called out to him. But this time James didn't run.

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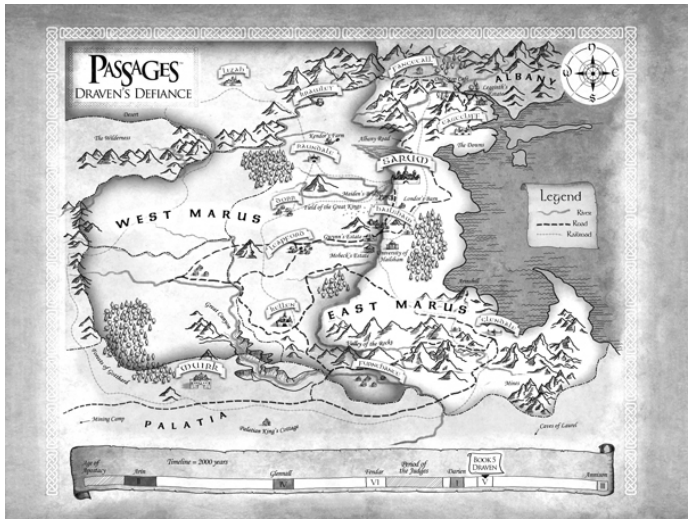
MARUS MANUSCRIPT 5



THE CHRONICLES OF THE APPRENTICED

DRAVEN'S DEFIANCE

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PASSAGES
DRAVEN'S DEFIANCE
ALBANY
N
W
E
S
Legend
Rivers
Road
Railroad
WEST MARUS
EAST MARUS
BARIO
PALATIA
Timeline = 2000 years
Book 3
Draven

for Dale, with love





Ouch was the first thing I thought when I opened my eyes and looked around the dark railway tunnel. I lifted my hand to my forehead. I felt a bump but no blood. I struggled to sit up.

Ouch. My hands scraped against the gravel under me. Whoever designed these railway tunnels didn't build them for pedestrians, that's for sure. I looked up and saw the thing that had knocked me flat. It was a short beam with an iron ring attached. I knew it was a leftover from the old days, when the railway workers hung lanterns in the tunnels.

I felt embarrassed. I should have remembered it was there. But when I had started to run through the tunnel, my eyes were dazzled from the afternoon sunlight and didn't adjust to the dark in time. I hadn't thought to look for anything hanging down like that. So *kaboom*, I banged my head on it.

The smell of oil and soot made my nose twitch, and I held back a sneeze. The railway tunnel stretched out in both directions from where I sat. With a little catch in my breath, I realized something was wrong. It was darker outside than it had been a minute ago—darker than when I first went into the tunnel. It had been a clear summer's day, not a cloud in sight, so the sun couldn't have faded that way.

And where were Donny and Mike? They were my two friends who had come with me to the railroad tracks to see the new Chicago-to-Dallas Turbo-Fire train engine. I remembered, too, that I was going through the tunnel to talk to some man on the other side who was working near the tracks. We thought he might know exactly when the train was coming.

Scrambling to my feet, I decided to go back to where Donny and Mike were waiting when I went into the tunnel.

They'd been sitting on the bank next to the tracks. It was our favorite spot because it overlooked an older section of the tracks where the trains had to slow down for the bend into the tunnel. "Hey!" I shouted as I jogged to the end of the tunnel. "Mike! Donny!"

I came out into the sunlight and right away started to worry. Mike and Donny weren't there. And the sun was definitely lower in the sky, as if it were just about to go down. I put my hands on my hips and looked around. How long was I knocked out? I figured it was only a minute, maybe not even that long. But it must've been longer. Did Mike and Donny run for help because they thought I was hurt? But why would both of them go? Why didn't one of them stay with me? Or they could have gotten that railway man to help. I mean, they wouldn't just leave me lying there.

Or would they?

Boy, did I have a few choice words for them.

"Mike! Donny! Quit fooling around!" I shouted just in case they were playing a trick. Yelling made my head hurt, though. I lightly touched my bump.

Ouch.

I made my way up the bank and knew right away that something else was different. When Mike, Donny, and I had sat on the bank before, the grass had been green. I had thought about how damp it was because of the rain we'd had the day before. But this grass was dry and brittle. I shrugged and carried on. At the top of the bank, I could see the bridge that formed the top of the tunnel. Beyond that we'd seen the railway worker messing around with a signal by the tracks. That's why I'd run into the tunnel in the first place. Now, though the tracks shot out as far as I could see, there was no railway man.

I sat down, still feeling a little woozy, and tried to think things through. Everything looked awfully strange. Even though it was dusk, all the colors seemed brighter than usual. The brown grass looked golden. The gray gravel along the railroad tracks seemed like a bright gray. The red brick of the tunnel leaped out at my eyes. Even the black lines of the tracks themselves looked sharp, as if somebody with a fine-pointed pencil had drawn them into the landscape. But the *sun*—that's the thing I couldn't take my eyes off of. It sat there in the sky, big and orange, just inches above the horizon. And

that's what bothered me. It wasn't getting any closer to the ground. It hung where it was. No matter how long I watched, neither it nor the shadows ever moved.

My heart suddenly lurched. If it was nearly dusk, I'd been at the railroad tracks most of the day. I looked around. Where *were* Mike and Donny? If they'd gone for help, where was the ambulance? Why hadn't my parents come to get me? Surely they'd be worried by now. It didn't make any sense.

I'd better get home fast, I decided, and I went back to the bottom of the bank to follow the tracks toward town.

I hadn't gone far when I heard a chugging noise. It sounded like a steam engine approaching on the track behind me. But steam trains hadn't ridden on these tracks for years. Still, the sound was clear. And then came the whistle. I turned back to look. Just as I did, a black steam engine emerged from the blackness of the tunnel, white steam puffing up from its smokestack.

"Far out," I said and stopped to watch it go past. I'd only seen a real steam engine in a museum. This one was shiny black all over, except for the chrome connecting rods that pushed forward and backward on the wheels like arms and elbows. The engine was followed by the tender, which carried the fuel and water, followed by a couple of passenger carriages filled with—

I did a double take. The passenger cars were lit from inside, and I could make out clearly that they were filled with men in black-and-red uniforms. My first impression was that they looked like Nazis from an old war movie. But I knew that wasn't possible, either.

The passenger cars were followed by cattle cars. I began to count them, wondering who would be transporting cattle by an old steam engine, when I saw hands reaching out from between the wooden slats. My mouth fell open in shock. There were *people* in those cars, and not just a few. The carriages were jam-packed with them—hundreds, I figured. Many were crying out, shouting for help. I stumbled on a rock and fell to my knees, but my eyes never moved from those cattle cars.

More soldiers filled the caboose, and one who carried a rifle and stood outside, at the back railing, saluted me with a slight smile.

Are they prisoners? I wondered. *Is the train transferring*

inmates from one prison to another?

I shook my head. Donny, Mike, and I had watched a lot of different kinds of trains go past town, but we'd never seen one carrying prisoners. At least, they'd never carried prisoners in a cattle car. I was sure that kind of thing was against the law. It was so cruel.

The train disappeared around the next bend, and for the first time I started to think I was in a dream. That made more sense than anything I'd seen so far. It certainly explained why the sun was still exactly where it had been 15 minutes ago. And why I'd seen that strange train. And why no one had come to look for me. Maybe I was at home asleep in my bed . . . or maybe I was still knocked out in the tunnel, and even now Mike and Donny were trying to bring me around. Or maybe I was in the hospital.

I'd read stories about things like that—kids in comas having really vivid dreams. Maybe that's what was happening to me now.

I was getting more and more convinced of it the longer I walked. Nothing looked familiar. All the landmarks I'd expected to see were gone. There was no sign of Eddy's Convenience Store over near the highway, where Mike, Donny, and I had stopped to get sodas on our way to our spot by the tunnel. The highway wasn't there, either. And I couldn't find the field with the big oak tree that had a tire hanging from it on a rope. Or the intersection of Route 24 and Dixon's Road—probably because there was no Route 24 and no Dixon's Road to form an intersection.

I walked on and on, the sun hanging motionless in the sky, my mouth getting dry, and my heart pumping harder and harder. I was growing scared now. Had I gone in the wrong direction? Even though I'd often gone down to the tracks to watch the trains, I had lived in town only a few months and might've lost my way.

Finally I found a dirt road that looked familiar, and I branched off from the tracks to follow it. I figured it would eventually take me to someone who might have a telephone. My feet kicked up the dirt in clouds of dust, which was weird. It had rained a lot the day before, yet this ground was bone-dry. And the grass on both sides of the road was as dead as if we'd been in a drought for years. In the distance, I could see forests of skeletal trees. I knew for a fact that the trees I'd seen

earlier in the day were thick with green leaves. The road came to a small bridge that crossed what I assumed was a riverbed. It looked as if it hadn't seen water in ages.

At school I once saw a movie about the dust bowls of Oklahoma in the 1930s, where everything had turned brown, the water had dried up, and the people had been forced to move away or die. That's what this reminded me of. I half expected an old pickup truck to round the corner, driven by a man looking like Henry Fonda, except he wouldn't be a famous movie star but a poor, down-and-out guy with patches on his clothes and dirt smudged on his cheeks. And he'd have a thin wife with pinched eyes and a turned-down mouth, and she'd be carrying a hungry baby in her lap on the passenger side. There'd be five other kids with them, in rags, sitting in the back of the truck with a few pots and pans and a trunk of old clothes.

The road went on, seemingly forever. I was feeling panicked by now. I didn't see anything I recognized. No signs pointed me this way or that way. Everything was perfectly still in the setting sun that wouldn't set. I started to feel the sun was teasing me with a night that wouldn't come. I was getting hungry and thirsty, too.

Then I glanced at the barren field on my right and saw a bright-red, two-story farmhouse in the distance. My heart leaped with joy. Maybe someone there could help me. Maybe someone would let me use the phone to call my parents to come and get me. I started to run toward the house, jogging at first and then picking up speed into a full run. As I got closer and closer, I noticed things that made my heart beat even faster. For example, the grass surrounding the house was thick and alive, spreading out like a green carpet. Clothes hung on a clothesline and gently moved in a breeze I couldn't feel. Fresh flowers grew in the flowerbeds around the porch and in boxes along some of the windows. Off to the side of the house stood a plot of vegetables. Everything had been so strangely empty and dead until now that the sight of normal life made me want to cry.

A woman came around the corner of the house carrying an empty basket. She was heavyset, her pale blouse and brown skirt billowing out from her like waterfalls. Her hair was tucked up under a scarf. She dropped the basket on the ground next to the vegetable garden and put her hands on her

hips as if trying to decide what to pick for dinner.

"Hello!" I shouted.

The woman was startled and turned around quickly to face me. "What do you want?" she snapped as I came within a few feet. Her eyes were pinched and her mouth tugged down at the corners, and she looked as if she'd been through something terrible. She reminded me of one of the mothers I saw in that film about the Oklahoma dust bowls.

"I'm lost," I explained. "I'm trying to get back home."

The woman shook her head. "I can't help you," she declared.

"Aren't there any towns around here?" I asked. I began naming a few of the towns I knew in the area.

The woman shook her head again. Then she did a curious thing. She took a step to one side as if she hoped to block my view of the garden behind her. I thought she looked nervous about it, as if I wasn't supposed to see it.

"If this is some kind of prank, I won't put up with it," she warned.

"It's not," I said, my voice quavering without my meaning for it to. "I'm lost, and I need to call my parents. Can I use your phone?"

"Phone?"

"Yeah, your telephone. Please."

The woman looked at me as if I were speaking Swahili. Then her eyes widened as if she suddenly realized what I was saying. "Oh, one of those boxes that rings!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah!"

"I don't have one of those. Nobody around here does. Those are for the city people."

I felt like crying again. How was it possible that there was somebody left in the United States who didn't have a phone? Had I walked through some kind of time warp? I clenched and unclenched my fists, which is something I do to help me think. "What city *is* around here?" I asked.

"Krawley is the closest city," she said, still keeping a watchful eye on me. "But that's miles away." Then she suddenly added: "There might be a ring box in Raundale."

"Raundale?" I'd never heard of it.

She nodded. "That's only a couple of miles from here."

A screen door slammed, and a young girl stepped out onto the porch. I figured she was about six years old. She had

long blonde hair and wore a flowered dress with a little apron. She had pale white legs, white socks, and black shoes. I thought of Alice in Wonderland.

"Mama," she said.

The woman cut her off. "Go back inside, Cylindra," she ordered.

"But who is he?" the girl asked, pointing at me.

"I'm Scott," I answered, wanting to be friendly.

"Go back inside *right this minute*," the woman commanded.

The girl hesitated only a second, smiled at me, then turned and went back inside the house.

"You have to get to the main road," the woman said, turning her attention back to me and pointing in a different direction from the way I'd come. "Just follow my drive until it comes to the road. Turn right, and you'll get to Raundale sooner or later."

"Thank you," I said, but I felt downhearted. The idea of walking several miles to a town I'd never heard of—one that might or might not have a "ring box"—was more than I could manage. I wanted to sit down for a minute. I wanted something to drink.

The woman must have realized how I felt because she said, "You look tired and worn out. Stay for a little while. Have a drink." She waved her hand nervously toward the garden. "You could join us for lunch."

"Thank you," I said again, relieved to be able to rest for a few minutes. "I'd love to have a drink, but I won't stay for —" I suddenly thought, *Lunch?* I looked at the sky. She must've meant to say "dinner."

The woman turned away and busied herself picking vegetables.

"May I help?" I asked, stepping around her to the edge of the garden.

"No, I'll do it," she said firmly. "No other hands but mine can touch this garden."

I stepped back. I knew people could be proud of their gardens, but not like this. "I won't hurt anything," I promised. "My mother grows vegetables too, and I help her sometimes."

The woman snapped her head up. "Your mother grows vegetables?" she asked, seemingly amazed at the idea. "Where?"

“Behind our house,” I answered, puzzled.

Her eyes narrowed as if she was trying to decide whether to believe me. “How does she grow vegetables?”

I shrugged. “Like everyone else does. In the ground. With seeds. And water.”

The woman stood up, her hands back on her hips. “All right, who are you?” she demanded.

Her tone took me aback. What had I done wrong? “I’m Scott,” I said.

“Did they send you here to spy on me? Is that it? Have they found out about me?”

“*They?* What *they?”* I asked, bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

Quick as lightning, she grabbed my ear and gave it a twist. “Then *how* does your mother grow vegetables?” she challenged.

“Ouch!” I cried out, turning my head in the direction of her twist until I thought I might fall over. “Cut it out!”

“Tell me!”

“She just *grows* them. I don’t know how. You’re hurting me!”

The woman probably would have twisted my ear off if we hadn’t heard a car coming up the drive just then. “You’ve betrayed me,” she whispered. She let go of my ear, and I suddenly found myself off balance. I fell onto my side in the dirt.

A large black sedan with smoked windows approached.



The woman moved quickly toward the house. I got the impression that she wanted to run inside, but the car arrived and pulled to a stop just as she reached the porch steps. It looked really official, like the kind that presidents and ambassadors ride in. This one looked a lot older, though, like the ones they used back in World War II. Several men got out. They wore the black-and-red uniforms I'd seen on the soldiers in the steam train.

The woman stopped where she was.

Another vehicle pulled up behind the car. It looked like a Jeep and had what looked like a machine gun mounted on the back. Another man in black and red sat behind the gun, his hand resting on it.

What in the world is going on here? I wondered. I got to my feet as fast as I could and tried to make sense of what I was seeing. It felt as if I'd walked in on somebody's movie, but nobody had told me what the movie was or what my part was supposed to be.

One of the men opened the rear passenger door of the limousine. With a great flourish, a short man with a shaved head and a thin black mustache got out and walked toward the woman.

After looking her over, he asked formally, "You are Wydrah?"

"Who wants to know?" she replied defiantly.

"My name is Colonel Krake. I am here on the business of Supreme Commander Mobeck!" he barked. He waved a hand at his men and ordered, "I want samples of everything. The grass. Those flowers. The water in the well. And especially whatever she has growing in that garden." The men saluted and went off in separate directions. As an

afterthought, the colonel shouted, “I believe I saw fruit trees on the other side of the house too!”

One of the men, a soldier, came over to the garden and scowled at me. “Step aside,” he ordered. I obeyed. He began pulling up carrots, potatoes, and sprouts and throwing them in Wydrah’s basket.

“They’ll do you no good,” Wydrah stated.

“We’ll see about that,” Colonel Krake replied. “How long did you and Draven think you could get away with it? The rest of the world has suffered for over three years, and you have your own little paradise. Did you really think we wouldn’t learn about your secret eventually?”

“I have done nothing wrong,” Wydrah answered boldly. “Everything I have here is given by the hand of the Unseen One.”

“Given by some technological trickery of *Draven*, you mean.”

“He is the voice of the Unseen One. That he chose to bless me with—”

“Don’t give me your religious mumbo jumbo,” Krake growled. “You know it is against the law to even *think* such things, let alone speak them aloud.”

“Make all the laws you want. You can’t outlaw the truth.”

Krake suddenly backhanded Wydrah across the face. The force of the blow knocked her aside, but she didn’t fall. I was stunned for a moment, but then I instinctively started forward. I had been taught that a man should never hit a woman, and that if one did, you stopped him from doing it again.

Firm hands gripped my shoulders. “Don’t give it a second thought,” the soldier who had been pulling vegetables advised. I fumed but stayed where I was.

Wydrah stood her ground against Colonel Krake.

He smiled and pointed to the cut on her lip. A tiny sliver of blood formed and fell from it. “Will that go away in a matter of days or a matter of minutes?” he asked, apparently amused by what he’d done.

Wydrah didn’t answer.

Krake clasped his hands behind his back and walked casually around the yard. “We’ll see.” He called out, “Draven!”

There was no reply. I stole a glance at the house and saw the corner of a curtain in one of the downstairs windows move. I caught a glimpse of the little girl who'd come out onto the porch earlier. Then she retreated.

"Draven!" Krake called again.

"He isn't here," said Wydrah.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. He doesn't tell me his plans."

Krake studied her for a moment. "Why should I believe you?"

Wydrah held up her hands. "I have no reason to lie."

"To protect him. To protect your paradise."

"It isn't mine to protect. It belongs to the Unseen One."

Krake frowned at her. "According to our files, you weren't always so faithful to the false religion of the Unseen One. Your husband was Kendor, a valiant warrior in our nation's war with Monrovia."

"He was a valiant warrior—until Mobeck sent him to the salt mines of Dorman," she said scornfully. "He died there, leaving me with this farm and a daughter to take care of alone."

"Not alone," Krake said simply. "You've taken up with this traitor Draven."

"I haven't *taken up* with him," she corrected. "He came to me in need of lodgings, and that's what I gave him. He has a room in the basement."

Krake signaled another soldier. The soldier saluted, then marched up the steps and into the house. I assumed he was going to search Draven's room. Wydrah watched uneasily as the soldier went. I wondered if the little girl would hide.

"You won't find anything," Wydrah said. "He doesn't have any personal belongings."

"Leave that to us."

"Your men had better not break anything."

Krake ignored her challenge. "You mentioned your daughter. Where is she?"

"She went to the village to visit a friend."

"She left this paradise of food and water to go to the village? Why not invite the village to come here, to share in your good fortune?"

"There is only ever enough for three. No more, no less."

Krake hooked a thumb in my direction. "And what

about this boy?"

"I assume he's one of your spies. He arrived only moments before you did."

Krake looked down his nose at me. "Don't be absurd. We don't send boys to do men's work. We tracked Draven to you by other means."

Wydrah seemed indifferent. "That boy means nothing to me either way. He's a stranger."

"I was lost," I volunteered. "I came here because I wanted to call my parents. Could you take me to a phone?"

Krake gazed at me as if I'd been hooting like an owl or gibbering like a chimpanzee. Then he turned back to Wydrah. "So when did Draven come to you?"

"Over three years ago. Right after time stood still."

I was just about to feel offended that he'd ignored me when the phrase "right after time stood still" suddenly penetrated my brain. I wasn't sure I'd heard correctly. *Right after time stood still.* Yes, she had said it. I looked at Krake's expression to see if he'd reacted to it. He hadn't. He continued to talk as normally as if she'd said Draven had come right after a thunderstorm. I glanced over my shoulder at the soldier behind me. He hadn't reacted either.

What does she mean? I wondered. I looked at the sky again. The sun was positioned exactly where it had been after I came out of the tunnel. How long ago was that? Two hours? Maybe three? And it hadn't moved. We had been on the edge of dusk all that time.

Right after time stood still.

I rubbed my temples. The bump on my forehead ached. My whole head hurt. And I still felt hungry and thirsty. None of this made sense.

"He was an enemy of the people, and you gave him a place to live," Krake was saying when I started to pay attention again.

"I had no idea who he was then," Wydrah said defensively. "I am isolated on this farm."

"And he brainwashed you into believing in the Unseen One."

"When he arrived, I thought my daughter and I would die from starvation. Then, because of this man, my grass began to grow, my trees yielded fruit, and my vegetable garden came to life. How else could I explain it? It was as if

time began again for us. My daughter has aged three years. I have lived normally. We thank the Unseen One for it all."

Krake paced around Wydrah and said derisively, "The rest of the world is trapped in frozen time, with a sun that doesn't rise or set, a day that doesn't change, pain that doesn't subside, and wounds that don't heal. No one is born, no one dies, everything is locked exactly where it was over three years ago when Draven somehow accomplished this witchcraft, and *you* are happy to—"

"Is everybody crazy?" I finally cried out.

All eyes turned to me.

"I can't take it anymore!" I shouted. "If this is somebody's idea of a bad joke, or if this is the funny farm department of a nearby loony bin, or if I've walked onto the set of a weird movie, then fine, you go ahead and play this game. But I want out of here! So somebody had better come up with a phone so I can call my parents *right now,* or I'll have you all arrested for kidnapping!"

I was proud of my speech. It had the right tone and volume to be taken seriously.

"Jorgan," Krake said to the vegetable-picking soldier.

"Yes, sir," Jorgan replied.

I turned to see what he was going to do and got smacked across the face just as I did. I tumbled to the ground, feeling as if a swarm of bees had instantly taken over the inside of my head. With Wydrah's basket in hand, Jorgan stepped over me and walked back to Krake.

I closed my eyes and groaned. I suddenly wished this whole thing was a bad dream and I'd wake up in the tunnel again. No such luck. I slowly got to my feet.

The rest of the soldiers returned to Colonel Krake as well. They all had their samples, collected from around the farm. They looked confused and worried as they held out what they had found. "Colonel Krake," the first soldier said nervously.

"What is this?" Krake shouted angrily. He slapped at the man's hands.

"It was grass when I dug it up," the soldier explained fearfully, "but it immediately turned to this." He pointed to the handful of brown straw now lying in the dirt.

"What about the rest of you?" Krake frowned as he inspected what they'd brought. "These were apples, I

suppose?"

A second soldier nodded. "They hung full and delicious on the trees, but they turned to this when I plucked them off." He looked a little green and added, "I tried to bite into one and got a mouthful of worms."

Krake grunted. The bucket from the well was filled with dust.

"I'm afraid it's true for everything, sir," the soldier who'd picked the vegetables said finally. He turned the basket upside down. Everything he'd put into it fell to the ground, rotten and dried out.

"Explain this," Krake demanded of Wydrah.

"I can't explain it," she replied. "All I know is that it can only be touched by my hand or it dies. It can't be taken away. It can't be used by anyone else."

Krake looked at her coolly. "I should arrest you now and tear this place apart." I waited, wondering if he would do it. Instead, he sighed and said, "But that won't help me find Draven, will it?"

"You won't find Draven unless he wants to be found."

Just then a commotion broke out at the front door. The soldier who'd gone in to search Draven's room had kicked open the screen door and stepped onto the porch. He was carrying a squirming Cylindra. She started to scream in protest. He roughly clasped his hand over her mouth.

"Leave her alone!" Wydrah shouted.

"In the village visiting friends?" Krake asked with a raised eyebrow. "What other lies have you told me?"

The soldier carrying Cylindra suddenly yelped as she bit his hand. He dropped her, and she scrambled to get away. He grabbed her by the nape of the neck and pulled her back again.

"Can't you keep control of a little girl?" Krake taunted the soldier.

The man, indignant at the jibe, jerked Cylindra to her feet and gave her a hard swat across the face. She tumbled down the steps, her head slamming against the corner of the bottom one. Then she lay still.

Wydrah was at her daughter's side in an instant. "Cylindra!" she cried out and cradled the limp child.

"We'll have to leave Draven a message," Krake said. He signaled his men back to the car, and they all got in. The

engine roared to life, and the car sped away in a cloud of dust. The Jeeplike vehicle didn't move. The driver sat stone-faced. The soldier behind the mounted gun pulled the bolt back.

I felt fear like an electric jolt go through me, and I dropped to the ground.

The soldier opened fire, the machine gun roaring like a million jackhammers. But the gun wasn't aimed at any of us. It was pointed at the house, letting loose a terrible spray of bullets. They splintered the wooden posts on the porch, tore through the boards along the walls, and shattered the window glass.

Wydrah held Cylindra tight as she kicked and crawled to get away from the flying debris. On and on the explosion of gunfire went. It lasted only half a minute, probably, but it seemed like an hour. Finally it stopped. The sudden silence was like a roar in my ears. Then the Jeep's engine came to life, the gears were wrenched into place, and the vehicle sped away.

Wydrah sobbed and struggled to her feet. She clung to Cylindra as she stumbled toward the house. I leaped up and followed them onto the porch.

"Is she all right?" I asked.

The screen door hung by only one hinge now, and Wydrah kicked it aside to go in.

"I can get help," I offered. "I'll find an ambulance."

I stopped inside the front door, breathless at what I saw. The front room was devastated. Lamps were broken and tipped over. Framed paintings and photos hung cockeyed on the walls or had fallen off completely. In the corner, the banister to the stairs was fractured. The chairs and sofa had the stuffing bursting out of them.

"Tell me what to do!" I begged. But Wydrah didn't answer. Weeping, she carried her daughter straight over to what was left of the stairs. "Where can I go for help?" I pleaded again.

Without turning, she said softly, "You can't go for help." She then took the stairs carefully, one by one, up and out of my view.

The world spun away from me then. I felt weak and dizzy and put my hand up to balance myself on the arm of a chair. But I must have missed and felt myself clawing at thin air as I passed out.



The light of the never-ending dusk filled the room. I woke up with a dirty, metallic taste in my mouth. What I had hoped was a dream—the men in black and red, the sun frozen in the sky, the hurt girl—was all real. I was on the floor in the front room of Wydrah's bullet-ridden home. The house was silent except for a ticking clock. It sat on the mantel of a fireplace I hadn't noticed when I came in. Miraculously, the bullets hadn't hit the clock.

Its ticking was reassuring. It was normal. I stood up and went over to it. According to the dial, it was a little after two o'clock. Whether that meant two in the morning or two in the afternoon, I didn't know. I groaned and peered out one of the shattered windows. Yes, the sun stood exactly where it had been before. Morning or afternoon, it didn't seem to matter. And then I wondered how anyone could measure time in a place where time stood still. What was the use of clocks? Wasn't that like taking a boat to the desert?

I wondered if I should go upstairs to see if Cylindra had woken up. Or maybe Wydrah needed my help. She didn't want it before, though, so I decided I should leave them alone for now.

My eye caught sight of an old-fashioned radio sitting on a stand. It was wooden and domelike, with a long strip of station frequencies at the bottom. I tried the on-off knob. Nothing happened. Then I noticed that the bullets had destroyed the plug.

My mouth was dry. I needed a drink. I listened for any movement upstairs. When I didn't hear anything, I decided Wydrah wouldn't be upset if I helped myself to some water. I walked down a hall off the front room. It went past a couple of doors, then opened into a dining room. The bullet damage

showed on the walls and table, but it wasn't as bad as in the front room.

I continued on to the kitchen. It looked nothing like any modern kitchen I'd ever seen. Instead, it reminded me of the kitchen in my grandparents' old house. It had a white basin sink with individual chrome knobs for hot and cold water. The refrigerator was also white and rounded and had a latch handle on the front. Rather than counters with cabinets, there were tables and a tall wood hutch with dishes inside. Amazingly, the bullets hadn't penetrated this far. It was as if the devastation hadn't occurred at all.

I found a glass and poured some water from the tap. As I drank it, I spied a stack of newspapers and magazines next to the back door. Curious, I picked them up and put them on the kitchen table to have a look. *Maybe they'll help me understand what's going on,* I thought.

The newspapers were yellowed copies of the *Sarum Times* and a smaller local paper called the *Raundale Gazette*. The magazines had glossy black-and-white photos on the front and featured names like *Our Life* and *Weekly News Digest*. They had white postage stickers on the bottom addressed to "Wydrah, Kendor's Farm-Near-Raundale."

The photo on the cover of one magazine showed a man dressed to the hilt in a military uniform and a woman dressed in a fancy gown, waving to a large crowd from a balcony. The man had slicked-back hair and a thin mustache. But it was the woman who caught my eye. She had the most beautiful face I'd ever seen. It was perfect. Her wide eyes seemed to stare at me directly. Her slender face was alive with a full smile that was just for me. The caption said it was "Our Supreme Commander Mobeck and his beautiful wife, Skalaw, the new First Lady of Sarum."

Eventually I tore myself away from that photo and flipped through the magazine. Then another. And another. And then a few more newspapers. Finally I felt certain that I wasn't anywhere near my town anymore. I wasn't even in the same country. Worse, I wasn't in the same *world*.

One newspaper had a headline about Supreme Commander Mobeck taking control of the government, the military, and all utility companies. Another headline told of the eastern part of this country called Marus breaking off to establish its own government. Mobeck hadn't liked it, but he

had lacked the military power at the time to stop it. The front page had a map of Marus. It was shaped like a large, lumpy potato, with a red line down the center to indicate how the nation had been divided. Even Sarum, the capital city, was divided in half. Border guards were placed on all major roads. It was as if Marus had had a civil war without any fighting.

The eastern part was governed as a democracy, with an elected president and congress. But the western part was ruled by Supreme Commander Mobeck and his wife. He was called "supreme commander" in the same way that Adolf Hitler had been called "chancellor" or "führer." It was just another name for *king*, I figured. They lived in a palace in the western part of Sarum.

I got the impression from the photos and articles that Mobeck and Skalaw were popular leaders. Everyone loved them and their ideas. They promised to bring the whole country into a new kind of civilization by getting rid of the old ideas, the old religions and superstitions, the old ways of thinking. They promised a new prosperity and true happiness for everybody.

In the name of progress, Mobeck had led his troops into the neighboring countries of Adria, Monrovia, and Gotthard. He had claimed it was his moral duty to unite all nations in enlightenment. To his annoyance, he hadn't been able to invade Palatia to the south or Albany to the north. They were allied with East Marus and would have proved too strong to fight at the time. But he was determined to build up his military power, and he might have succeeded by now, except for one problem. Well, one *person* who was a problem, I should say.

A man called Draven.

I saw a "rare" photo of him in one of the glossy magazines. He was a handsome man in an old-time movie-star way, like Errol Flynn or Clark Gable, with wavy hair and sharp eyes, a smiling mouth, and straight white teeth. Strangely, according to the magazine, he had different-colored eyes. The magazine said, "Legend has it that the so-called voices of the Unseen One characteristically have different-colored eyes—one blue, the other green."

I studied the photo. He didn't look like the kind of man who could be a troublemaker. But according to the government and the newspapers, he was. Apparently he kept

badgering Mobeck and Skalaw about leading the nation away from belief in the Unseen One. He claimed that they worshiped the "false gods of progress, man, science, and technology." The Unseen One was the source of life and worthy of faith, Draven said, and everything else was beneath Him. (At this point, I figured that believing in the Unseen One must be the same as believing in God. They sure sounded the same.)

Mobeck had tried to have Draven arrested, but no one could catch him. He seemed to escape easily to East Marus. This had made Mobeck want to attack that country all the more, but time had worked against him. Literally.

"Draven to Stop Time," announced the headline. The article then said that Draven had announced how the Unseen One was going to show His strength to the world by stopping time. "Then you will know and believe," Draven had said.

What happened next filled the newspapers and magazines. In the seventh hour after noon on the seventh day in the seventh month, the sun had stopped where it was in the sky. And everything had stopped with it. Nature had stopped. The seasons had stopped. The weather no longer changed. People stayed in whatever condition they were in at that moment. Hair and fingernails stopped growing. Everyone stopped aging. If people were sick, they stayed sick. If people were well, they couldn't get sick. Even if you tried to kill someone, let's say by stabbing or shooting, he or she would feel the pain, but the wounds would heal almost instantly.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to imagine what it had been like. Everyone and everything was exactly the same as at the moment time stopped. Yet people still went through the routines of eating, sleeping, waking up, and working.

The consequences were terrible. The sick suffered without dying. For a while, since the threat of being hurt didn't seem to bother hardened criminals, riots broke out and crime was rampant. The police didn't know how to stop people from breaking the law. Eventually the government set up a system of prisons and labor camps. Mobeck reasoned that bullets might not kill, but bodies could still be locked in chains and cells. He also figured out that pain was still pain, even though the healing might come quickly, so he made torture a feature of lawful punishment.

Because nature stood still, all the fields and trees gave

up whatever they'd been growing at that moment. Crops that were ready to harvest were picked. But all those that weren't ready remained unusable, inedible. Crops couldn't grow. Fruit couldn't ripen. So the food supply had steadily dwindled. The government had taken over the fields and orchards to distribute the available food to everyone, but it had begun to run out after the second year.

Water supplies had also started to dwindle because it wasn't raining when time stopped, so there was no rain to replenish them. (I guess if it had been raining at that moment, it would be raining even now and everything would be soaked and flooded.)

My head started to hurt from thinking it through. Did all this mean clothes couldn't change? If they were new then, were they new now? Could a car be crashed, or did the dents fix themselves right away? Did tools wear out? Could trees be cut down? How far did this whole time stoppage go?

I stared at the newspapers and magazines and tried to take it all in.

A few things made sense to me now. The steam train I'd seen when I first came out of the tunnel must have been taking people to prison or work camps. When Colonel Krake hit Wydrah in the mouth, he'd said something about whether she would heal quickly. She hadn't.

So somehow, for some reason, this little farm stood outside time. Wydrah had said it was a miracle brought about because of Draven. Vegetables grew, and fruit ripened. She and her daughter had even aged in the past three years.

I thought about the miracle and how it now worked against Wydrah. Bullets had destroyed part of the house, and it didn't repair itself. The soldier hurt Wydrah's daughter, and she was not healed.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a sound from upstairs. Someone was walking. I got up and followed the sound of footsteps across the upstairs floor, over to the stairs, then down to the front room. There I met up with Wydrah. She looked dazed. Her eyes were red as if she'd been crying the whole time she was up there.

I opened my mouth to ask about Cylindra, but Wydrah spoke first. "I will pick some vegetables for our supper," she said. Her tone was flat and the words mechanical. She then walked quietly toward the front door.

“But what about Cylindra?” I asked. “How is she?”

Wydrah paused at the door, her back to me. “My daughter is dead,” she said, and then she left.



In spite of my protests, Wydrah insisted on fixing us a meal. “It will go to waste otherwise,” she said firmly, and she went about preparing the food. We ate at the kitchen table in silence. Afterward, she brushed the shards of glass and chips of wood off the sofa in the front room and made it as comfortable as she could for me. “You’ll sleep here until we can figure out what to do with you,” she explained. Then she spread sheets and blankets across the torn cushions.

“I’m sorry about Cylindra,” I tried to say when I lay down, but the words caught in my throat and were choked out as a squeak. I swallowed hard and continued. “I’m not a spy. I don’t even belong here.”

“I know,” she replied. She went back upstairs.

It was past nine according to the clock on the mantel. I was exhausted, but my mind spun with what I’d seen in the newspapers and magazines. Then the day’s events wove their way into my thoughts, and I remembered the tunnel; the steam train; the long, endless walk that led me to the farm; the Nazilike soldiers; and the machine gun. I thought of Cylindra lying somewhere upstairs. I imagined Wydrah weeping over her daughter. The scenes and images replayed again and again in my head and burned like a fever.

A sound like a closing door made me jump. I didn’t think I’d fallen asleep, but I had. The clock said it was now a little before one o’clock. I sat up on the sofa and listened. Someone was in the kitchen . . . coming through the dining room . . . and now walking lightly down the hall. I got to my feet just as he stepped into the front room.

“Well!” a man said. “What happened here?” He moved into the room and surveyed the damage.

Though he seemed a little older than he had in the

photos, there was no mistaking who it was—Draven. His wavy hair was graying at the temples, and the lines around his eyes were etched more deeply. He was tall—well over six feet, I thought. He wore a tweed jacket with a white shirt and vest underneath and brown trousers. His clothes were rumpled and looked as if he'd been wearing them a long time. The outfit reminded me of the kinds of suits my father wore to his job as a philosophy professor at Campbell College—all except for his shoes: Draven had on black, knee-high boots.

He fixed his gaze on me. Even in that dusk light, I could see that his eyes were different colors. One was green, and the other was blue. It was startling at first, but then I remembered what the magazine had said about it.

"I was wondering when you would show up," he said to me, as if he'd been waiting for my arrival.

I was going to ask what he meant, but just then Wydrah came down the stairs. She was in a robe now, her hair disheveled. Somehow she looked a lot older than she had before.

Draven took one look at her and a shadow crossed his face.

Wydrah crossed the room in an instant and was on him, weeping and pummeling him with her fists. "It's all your fault!" she screamed. "My daughter is dead, and it's all your fault!"

Draven struggled to catch her arms. "Stop, Wydrah," he said gently.

"Why didn't you kill us right away?" she cried. "It would have been better than this! They came looking for you!"

Draven got hold of her arms and pulled her close. She collapsed against him, sobbing into his chest. He caressed her hair and patted her back, whispering comfort in her ear. Then I realized that he had also begun to cry. "I'm sorry," he said over and over.

Wydrah calmed down and stood away from him. Her voice took on its normal strength. "I took you in. I gave you a home. I never asked questions. I believed you when you said the Unseen One would protect us. But now . . ."

"I know," Draven said, his deep voice thick with his own tears. "I didn't know this would happen."

"You didn't know?" Wydrah was aghast.

“No, I didn’t,” he replied, shaking his head. “How could I? I am not the Unseen One who sees all and knows all. I’m only His voice.”

Wydrah glared at him for a moment, then said sternly, “I want you to leave this house. Now.”

Draven looked as if she’d slapped him across the face. After a moment, he recovered his composure enough to warn, “You’ll die.”

“So what? I don’t want to live without my daughter.”

He glanced away as if something outside had caught his eye. Then he said, “I’ll go. But I must see her first.”

Wydrah looked as if she might refuse him. But she must have thought better of it because she nodded and told him, “She is lying in her room.”

Draven went past us and up the stairs. Wydrah didn’t move but stood with her arms folded across her chest. I sat back down on the sofa and waited. I imagined Draven was going to pay his last respects. He felt bad, I could tell. The only reason the soldiers came to the house was to find him, so it was his fault in a way. But then I felt sorry for him because he couldn’t have known the soldier would slap Cylindra. No one could have anticipated that she’d fall and hit her head like that.

I watched Wydrah, who didn’t budge. I thought about saying something to defend Draven, to remind her that he wasn’t entirely to blame. But I didn’t know what to say. In a sense, it wasn’t my place to say anything. I was the stranger. I didn’t belong here. And it came to my mind that I should probably leave too.

But where was I supposed to go? Back to the tunnel with the hope of finding my way home?

We waited. After a while, I thought I heard the sound of a man crying. My heart sank.

Wydrah stiffened as we heard Draven returning. He came down the stairs, carrying Cylindra in his arms. She was still. I stood up, unsure what was going to happen next.

“How dare you!” Wydrah cried. “You have no right to touch my child!”

Suddenly the girl lifted her head. “Mommy!” she exclaimed, smiling and stretching out her arms.

Wydrah gasped, her face a mixture of shock and amazement. “Cylindra?”

“Were you crying?” her daughter asked.

Collecting Cylindra in a scoop of her arms and with a close hug, Wydrah answered, “Yes, yes, but it’s all right now.” She began to cry again anyway.

Draven stood at my side, and we watched Wydrah dance her daughter around the room in joy.

“That nasty man knocked me down, and I hit my head,” Cylindra said. “But I feel better now.”

“How is this possible?” Wydrah asked as she stopped her dance and sat Cylindra on the couch. She inspected the girl’s head, placed a hand to her heart, checked her pulse, and then touched her lightly all over as if she couldn’t believe her daughter was truly alive. Then she looked up at Draven. “I didn’t make a mistake. She was dead.”

“Thank the Unseen One,” said Draven.

Wydrah threw herself at his feet. “Forgive me,” she begged. “I’m sorry for what I thought, for what I said.”

Draven knelt down, lifted her chin with a finger, and smiled at her, but he didn’t speak.

“Never in the history of the world has this happened,” Wydrah said. “Has anyone ever come back from the dead?”

I was aware that Cylindra was looking at me. “What is she talking about?” she asked in a small voice.

“You’d better ask her later,” I answered with a shrug. I was tempted to reach out to touch her head, to feel her temperature. To be honest, I think I wanted to make sure she wasn’t some kind of ghost. But she smiled at me—the same way she’d smiled earlier—and I knew she was the same girl. Whatever had happened, she seemed in perfect health.

Draven, meanwhile, lifted Wydrah to her feet. “We have to leave,” he told her.

She looked crestfallen. “I didn’t mean what I said before,” she said pleadingly. “You can stay as long as you want.”

“Thank you,” he replied, “but I really do have to leave. Come on.”

To my surprise, Draven’s “come on” was addressed to me. “Me? You want me to come with you?” I asked.

“Why else do you think you’re here?”

“But what about us?” Wydrah asked. “If you go now, we’ll be doomed.”

Draven put a reassuring hand on her shoulder as he

said, “You’ll be all right.”

“But—”

“Trust in the Unseen One.” Draven waved a hand at me and stepped out onto the front porch. “Go to bed, both of you,” he said to them over his shoulder. “You must be very tired.”

I started to follow him, then turned quickly to Wydrah and Cylindra. I didn’t know what to say to either of them. “Thanks for everything,” I finally managed with a burning blush. “It was nice meeting you.”

But, strangely, Wydrah was sitting on the sofa with Cylindra, and they both looked as if they were about to slump over, asleep.

I rushed after Draven, who was now walking toward the field. “What’s going to happen to them?” I asked when I caught up with him.

“They’ll sleep and awaken with only the memory of a bad dream.”

“But the house . . .”

“What about it?”

“You saw it,” I answered. “It’s a wreck.”

“Is it?”

I was confused. “Isn’t it?”

“You tell me.”

I looked back at the house to confirm the damage I knew was there, and then I stopped dead in my tracks. The splintered wood, the shattered windows, the screen door that had hung by a single hinge—everything was fixed, just like it was when I had first arrived.

I gaped at Draven. “Are you a magician?” I asked.

Draven frowned back at me. “Don’t ever refer to the Unseen One’s doings as magic. It’s an insult.” Then he turned and walked on.

“I’m sorry,” I said, picking up my pace to stay with him. “But I’m really confused about what’s going on here.”

“What are you confused about?”

I was at a loss for where to begin. “Well . . . *everything*.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“Back at Wydrah’s house, you acted like you knew me.”

“I don’t *know* you. In fact, I don’t even know your name. But I knew you were the one who was supposed to help me. So what’s your name?”

"I'm Scott," I answered. "But how am I supposed to help you? I don't belong here."

"Of course you belong here. The Unseen One wouldn't have brought you if you didn't belong here."

"Then you've got me confused with someone else. I'm not from this world," I explained, the words sounding unbelievable even as I said them. "I went into a tunnel and—"

Draven waved a hand at me. "You're talking about incidentals. This world, that world, what does it matter? Marus has a long history of receiving help from unusual places. It was a boy like yourself who brought the judgment of the Unseen One to Marus in the days of Arin. A mysterious child from another world traveled with our patriarch Marus himself when he came to this country on the instructions of the Unseen One. Another boy from another world helped Glennall save this world from great famine. Three children from another world brought the signs that helped Fendar in the days when our people were slaves to the Palatians. And there are many more examples. You are what we now call *giftbearers*."

"Giftbearers?"

"Yes. You come bearing gifts that help the people of faith fulfill the purposes of the Unseen One."

"Are you saying that *I'm* a giftbearer?"

"You may prove to be more than that," Draven said cryptically.

"But I don't belong here," I insisted. "I have a mother and a father in my world."

"And I had a mother and father once too. But often our callings take us away from them. It's the sacrifice we must make."

"Nobody asked me if I wanted to make that kind of sacrifice."

Draven stopped short there in the middle of the field and turned to face me. "I'll ask you now. Do you want to continue with me or go back to your world? Say the word, and you'll be returned."

I was surprised by the offer. Did I want to go back now? I had to think about it a moment. "I want to go back, but . . ." I hesitated.

"But?"

"But first, can you tell me what I'll miss if I leave?"

“The mighty works of the Unseen One. A time of miracles. Or you may miss nothing at all. How can I answer that question? None of us get any guarantees from the Unseen One about the future.”

I frowned as I clenched and unclenched my fists. “Do I have to decide right this minute? Can’t I go along with you for a little while longer?”

“I can’t promise your safe return if you stay. From this point on, everything will move dangerously fast. We are going to Sarum to confront Mobeck. Anything can happen to us.”

“You mean . . . he might kill us?”

“He’d like to kill *me*, I know that for sure.” Draven looked off to the horizon. “I have a train to catch. Are you coming with me or not?”

He didn’t wait for my answer but strode onward.

I was frozen by indecision. I could go home right now and carry on as I always had. Or I could stay here and play out what I knew would be an adventure. The choice felt agonizing. It seemed the same as asking Wendy not to go with Peter Pan. Or asking Peter, Lucy, Edmund, and Susan not to go to Narnia. Or asking that Connecticut Yankee guy not to go to King Arthur’s court.

Draven disappeared over the next ridge.

“Wait!” I shouted and raced after him.



We reached the railroad tracks just as a freight train chugged alongside. “This one will do,” Draven said as he broke into a jog. I ran behind him, being careful to stay clear of the wheels and tracks. He reached out to an open door, grabbed the handle, and pulled himself up. He then held his hand out to me. “Take hold!” he shouted.

I was feeling winded, and for a fraction of a second, I wasn’t sure I’d make it. But then his hand, strong and sure, caught mine and hoisted me aboard.

The car was empty and dirty. Draven went to the far end and dropped onto a small cushion of hay. With his hands tucked behind his head, he looked the picture of comfort. I dropped down next to him.

“What now?” I asked.

“Sleep,” he said. “I’ll wake you when it’s time.”

I lay back into the hay and let the gentle bounce of the car and the sound of the wind going past the door lull me to sleep. It must’ve been a deep sleep. I don’t remember dreaming or sensing any change around me until, somewhere in my slumbers, I was aware that all had gone still. I opened my eyes. Draven stood at the door, his hands shoved deep in his coat pockets. I stretched, and he turned to me.

“Good morning,” he said with a smile. “I was just about to wake you.”

“We stopped.”

Draven nodded. “So we have. Which means it’s time to get off and find better accommodations.” With that, he leaped down from the car.

I got up and sluggishly followed, brushing at the hay on my clothes and in my hair as I went. From the door, I could see that we’d reached a major station. Lines of railway cars sat

on more tracks than I could count.

"This way," Draven called out from my left.

I scrambled down and skipped back and forth among the long iron rails and thick wooden ties to keep up with him. Together we ducked around another freight train and took some stairs that led down into an underpass. It seemed to stretch for a mile, with stairs leading up from it to various station platforms. Draven finally saw the number he wanted and gestured for me to follow him up the corresponding flight of stairs. At the top, we came to the door of a car in a long passenger train. Draven opened it and gestured for me to board.

"But we don't have any tickets, do we?" I asked.

He gave me a gentle nudge. "It's been taken care of," he said.

I got on board and looked around. We were in a small passageway. I whispered, "Yeah, but aren't you a wanted man? Won't people be looking for you?"

Draven chuckled and pointed me toward the front of the train. "I can be found easily enough, if you know where to look," he answered.

We walked through the cars. Other passengers were getting on, putting their luggage in the overhead or underseat compartments. "Aren't we going to sit down?" I asked.

"Sure," he replied. "In the dining car."

"A dining car?" I wondered aloud. "What kind of dining car can you have in a terrible famine?"

"An expensive one."

And it was—a car in the middle of the first-class section with white tablecloths and silver salt and pepper shakers. We slid into a small booth.

A porter dressed in a sharp red uniform and cap suddenly appeared and eyed us warily. "We won't be serving until 15 minutes after the train departs," he informed us.

Draven nodded and replied, "Thanks. We're meeting the minister of religious affairs."

The porter scrutinized us further. I picked a piece of hay from my hair. "If you say so," he finally sniffed and walked away.

"The minister of what?" I asked Draven. I felt as though I was spending all my time asking questions lately.

"You'll see."

We then sat in silence. I fiddled with the salt and pepper shakers. Draven kept his hands folded serenely on the table, his gaze fixed on the trains outside. I watched the people moving to and fro on the platform. Many looked down-and-out, with ragged clothes and gaunt faces. I also kept an eye on those who walked past us in the car. I expected someone in a black-and-red uniform to recognize Draven at any moment and rush in to arrest him. But no one did. No one paid him or me any attention at all.

Eventually the conductor blew a whistle on the platform and gave the signal for the train to leave. It lurched forward, then moved slowly away from the platform. Soon we were well on our way to wherever we were now going. I didn't know. And, tired of pestering Draven with so many questions, I decided not to ask.

Suddenly he said, "Ah."

I looked up. A bald, heavyset man in a dark three-piece suit sauntered into the car. He was so busy trying to navigate himself around a food cart that he didn't see us. But then he lifted his eyes and caught sight of Draven. The effect was immediate. His eyes went wide, his face went white, and his jowls quivered. He glanced nervously at the porter, who was wiping glasses, and then around the empty car and tried to approach us casually.

"Sit down, Ladan," Draven said with a large smile.

"Are you crazy?" Ladan asked, his jowls still quivering. "Are you trying to get arrested?"

Draven ignored him. "Scott, I'd like you to meet Ladan. He's Supreme Commander Mobeck's right-hand man when it comes to religion in our lovely country. His *token* priest."

"Hi," I said.

"Nice to meet you," Ladan said quickly and then scooted in next to me on the bench. "Draven—"

"Are you going to order?" the porter asked, suddenly appearing again.

"No!" Ladan snapped.

"I'd like to order," Draven announced. "And I'm sure Scott is hungry too."

I admitted I was starving.

"What do you have?" Draven asked the porter.

The porter sighed impatiently and produced three menus. I looked one over and saw that it had breakfasts of

powdered eggs, fabricated meats, and artificial juices. So that was how they tried to cope with the crisis: The scientists came up with alternative foods. “Is the food any good?” I asked.

“As good as you’ll get anywhere,” Draven replied.

I shrugged and asked for their “hearty breakfast platter” of something resembling pancakes. Draven asked for eggs, bacon, and coffee. Ladan didn’t want anything and waved the porter away impatiently.

Once the porter left, Ladan leaned on the table to face Draven. “What are you up to?” he demanded in a harsh whisper.

“What are *you* up to?” Draven countered. “Why aren’t you at the palace, kowtowing to Mobeck?”

Ladan looked embarrassed and answered, “I’m on a mission for him.”

“A mission!” Draven said, obviously pretending to be impressed. “To do what?”

Ladan lowered his head. “To find food for his horses.”

Draven threw his head back and laughed loudly.

Ladan ignored him. “I’ve been scouring the north part of the country while Mobeck scours the south.”

“You’ve been in the north for the past few days? What a coincidence. Some of Mobeck’s goons came looking for me there and nearly killed a little girl in the process.”

“It had nothing to do with me.”

“Didn’t it?”

“No. How could it? I never know where you are from one minute to the next. I don’t *want* to know. I wish I didn’t know now.”

Just then, two officers dressed in black and red entered the car. Ladan gasped. “May the Unseen One have mercy!” he whispered.

The two men nodded to the porter and even saluted Ladan, but they didn’t acknowledge Draven and me at all. I began to think we were invisible. They sat down at a table at the far end of the car and chatted amiably.

Ladan rubbed his face with a napkin. “This is more than my heart can take,” he said miserably.

“You should lay off the fabricated cholesterol,” Draven joked.

“What do you want from me, Draven?”

“I want you to deliver a message to Mobeck.”

"Oh no."

"Tell him I want to meet him."

"*What?"* Ladan reacted so loudly that the two officers turned to look at him. He cleared his throat and smiled at them. The porter returned with our breakfasts and set them on the table. I sniffed the so-called pancakes and frowned. They looked and smelled like nothing I'd ever seen before. I carefully poked at them with a fork and then tried them in small portions. They tasted like a pair of old socks.

Draven, meanwhile, ate his food as if it was the best he'd had in a long time.

Ladan drank some artificial water. "You want to *meet* Mobeck face-to-face?" he asked incredulously.

Draven nodded. "That's right. Ten o'clock tomorrow morning on the Field of the Great Kings. I assume you remember where that is."

"The royal park between Sarum and Hailsham," Ladan replied.

"At Maiden's Bridge."

Ladan shook his head. "Mobeck will throw me in the work camps if I deliver a message from you."

"No, he won't."

"What if you don't show up?"

"I'll be there."

"You say that, but you don't always know. What if the Unseen One whisks you away like He's done in the past? Mobeck will execute me." Ladan groaned.

"I'll be there."

"Why should I believe you?"

"What if I gave you a guarantee?"

Ladan raised an eyebrow. "What kind of guarantee?"

"I'll send my protégé with you."

"Him?" Ladan asked, gesturing to me.

I nearly gagged on the pancakes. "But what if he sends *me* to a work camp?" I sputtered.

Draven leaned back and leveled a steady gaze at us. "The two of you are going to have to trust me. Just as I trust the Unseen One."

"What if Mobeck won't agree to meet with you?"

"He will."

"Why?"

"Because this is the final showdown," Draven said as he

dropped his napkin onto his plate. “The Unseen One is going to restore time.”

Ladan gaped at Draven.

Draven scooted out of the booth and stood up. “Tomorrow morning at Maiden’s Bridge.”

I made a move, hoping to get Ladan to let me out.

“Stay where you are,” Draven said. “Finish your meal. Enjoy the first-class compartment.”

“But—”

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

The officers at the other table now seemed to be taking notice of Draven. They looked at him carefully, then leaned their heads together in close whispers. Draven nodded to me and Ladan and then walked out of the car through the opposite door.

“Where’s he going?” I asked. “Will he jump off the train or hide away somewhere?”

“More than likely he’ll simply disappear,” Ladan said with a sigh. “It’s what he always does.”



6

The train took us past rolling fields and villages, and then the houses and buildings came closer and closer together until we arrived at the city of Sarum, the capital of Marus. A long black limousine, looking like something from our 1940s and much like Colonel Krake's car—a thought that made me shudder—met us at the front of the large terminal and drove us to the palace.

The city itself went by in a blur of wide avenues lined with barren trees, large buildings with tall pillars, massive statues of posturing heroes, cathedral-like department stores, and closed restaurants. Many of the buildings had large black-and-red flags hanging from them. Each had a strange design of a snake curling up a green-leafed tree.

Ladan had been broody and quiet the entire trip, and I was hesitant to ask any questions. But my curiosity got the better of me. "What does that mean?" I asked him, pointing to the insignia.

Ladan looked at me with surprise. "What are they teaching you kids in school?" he asked rhetorically. "That's the national emblem of West Marus."

"But what does it mean?"

Ladan sighed impatiently. "A story has been told about the original man and woman and how the Unseen One had given them the rule of the world's original paradise."

"Adam and Eve?" I asked.

"I don't believe they were ever named," Ladan corrected me. "But a serpent in the tree persuaded them that knowledge and glory in an unknown world were greater than being servants in the Unseen One's paradise, and so they revolted and lost paradise."

"So why did Mobeck put that on a flag?"

“Because Mobeck agrees with the serpent. He believes in the ideal of Marutian Enlightenment—that Marutians are genetically superior to all other races. He believes we are destined to rule the world through science, technology, and faith in the future of Marus.”

I looked at the people as they crowded the sidewalks and streets, many with the same rags and gaunt faces I’d seen before, and wondered if they would agree.

Ladan was also looking out the window and said hopefully, “But I believe that deep in his heart, Mobeck believes in and fears the Unseen One.” Then, as if to answer the question I hadn’t asked, he added, “But he also fears his wife and loves power too much to acknowledge his faith.”

We turned through some large gates and followed the driveway up to the palace. The main building had a golden rotunda with something on top that might have been an angel. The palace then stretched to the left and the right, pointing to a great lawn on one side and forest on the other.

More men in black and red opened the car doors and led us into the palace itself. We went through an arched doorway into a foyer filled with paintings, statues, and a marble staircase that curved up to the next floor. A banner of the serpent in the tree hung like a giant curtain over everything. We then turned down a lush paneled hallway filled with more paintings, artwork, and flags.

“Where is he?” Ladan asked one of the soldiers.

“The great hall,” came the soldier’s reply. “He and Lady Skalaw are preparing for the banquet tonight.”

“What banquet?” Ladan inquired.

“He is having a state banquet for all his advisers,” the soldier said, looking surprised. “Weren’t you told?”

Ladan sighed again, the weight of the world on his shoulders. “Of course I wasn’t told. I was too busy looking for horse feed in the north.”

The great hall was great indeed, with high walls and tall, triangular windows. The ceiling was covered with painted scenes of battles involving men on horseback, cannons, ships, tanks, and airplanes.

The beautiful woman I’d seen on the magazine cover stood in the middle of a sea of tables, all being laid for a grand banquet. Watching her for a moment, I thought she was more beautiful than the picture could have shown. She looked

majestic, standing there in a long golden gown.

"Not there!" she hissed at a servant. "Put it on the other side."

"Yes, Lady Skalaw," the servant said and moved a vase of artificial flowers to another part of the table.

The man I saw on the magazine cover, Supreme Commander Mobeck, sat in a chair on the stage at the far end of the hall. He watched his wife and the servants with undisguised boredom, but he brightened when Ladan approached.

"Ladan!" he exclaimed, leaping to his feet and moving to the edge of the stage. "Good news for my horses, I hope. They're going to die from that fabricated hay if we don't do something."

Ladan saluted. "I'm afraid my mission was fruitless," he reported. "The north country is barren."

"Confound it!" the supreme commander shouted and kicked at a microphone stand. It tipped and fell with a crash. "There was nothing in the south either."

"Is something wrong, dear?" Lady Skalaw asked as she approached.

Mobeck growled and turned away from her like a child.

"No hay for his horses?" Skalaw asked Ladan.

Ladan shook his head.

Skalaw looked at me with cold gray eyes. "Who is this vagrant?" she demanded.

Ladan swallowed nervously. "He is here as part of a message."

"Oh?" Mobeck asked and came around to face us again. "A message from whom?"

"From Draven."

"Draven!" Skalaw shrieked.

"By the two moons!" Mobeck exclaimed.

"It would be better if I explained in private," Ladan advised. His jowls were shaking again, and his skin had gone pasty.

"This way." Mobeck climbed down from the stage and signaled for his wife and Ladan to follow him. They retreated to a corner of the hall, where they huddled together. I waited where I was, catching my reflection in one of the shiny silver plates that dotted the length of both sides of a long table. I looked tired and dirty.

Ladan, Mobeck, and Skalaw whispered loudly. I couldn't make out any of the words, but the hisses rose and fell as if someone were slowly letting the air out of the building.

"By the two moons!" Mobeck shouted again at one point.

At another point, Skalaw clenched her fists and yelled, "He'll get more than he bargained for!"

After a few minutes, Mobeck and Skalaw slipped out through a door that was nearly hidden in a wall panel. Ladan came back to me. "That went better than I expected," he said, relieved.

"They aren't going to send us to a work camp?" I asked.

"Or kill us," he replied, dabbing at his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief. "They've gone off to talk to other advisers. Meanwhile, let's find you a room and a bath."

We walked down one corridor after another until we came to Ladan's private apartment, which consisted of a series of interconnected rooms. I noticed one with a bed, another with a big desk and bookcases jammed with books, and another that looked like a living room. I don't know how many rooms there were, but Ladan took me down a hallway to one, about the size of a closet, with a single bed.

"I'll have my servant help you with a bath," he said. He sniffed the air and added disdainfully, "And we'll find you some fresh clothes."

I sat on the edge of the bed to take off my sneakers. A minute later, a tall, thin man with smiling eyes and a mop of white hair came in. "My name is Adimah, and I'm here to make you presentable," he announced. He dropped a robe onto the bed. "Change into that while I have your clothes cleaned."

"Where is Ladan?" I asked.

"He has things to do," Adimah explained. "If you need anything or have any questions, simply ask me." Then he left the room.

I got out of my dirty clothes and put on the robe. It was thick and soft.

"I'm drawing you a bath," Adimah said when he returned to get my clothes a minute later. "It's reconstituted water, so I wouldn't swallow it or get it in my eyes if I were you."

"I'll be careful."

Adimah led me down the hall to a bathroom. In the center was a long, white, claw-footed tub filled to the top with bubbles. "Pull that cord by the door if you need me," he said as he closed the door behind me. I got into the bathtub and slid into the hot water and bubbles. It was like burrowing into a sleeping bag that had been sitting next to a roaring fire all night. It was perfect. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

A few minutes later, I heard the latch click and a gentle squeak of the hinges as the door opened. I glanced over, expecting to see Adimah again. Instead, a man with thick black hair and a scowling face came at me with his hands held out. I shouted, but the big hands were on me, pushing me down into the water. Once, then twice, and then a third time. I gasped for air as I was dragged out of the tub and thrown onto the floor.

"Get dressed," the man said in a low, thick voice.

I grabbed the robe just in time for him to give me a hard push toward the door. He jabbed and shoved me into the living room, went to the far corner, and gave a panel in the wall a nudge. It opened. Yanking at my robe, he dragged me into a dark passageway and then down a labyrinth of secret corridors. We finally reached another hidden doorway, which he somehow opened before pushing me into a dimly lit room that had a small wood desk and two chairs.

"Sit down," he said and left the room.

Soaked and shivering, I sat on one of the chairs. I considered trying to run back into the secret passageway, but I knew I would get hopelessly lost, so I waited.

Ten, maybe 15 minutes went by, and then a regular door opened on the other end of the room. Lady Skalaw entered with a poise and flourish that reminded me of an actress on a stage. She crossed to the desk and sat down in the chair opposite to me. Again I was struck by how beautiful she was. Her face was pale and slender, her mouth full and round. Her eyes, dark gray, seemed as if they looked through me. Her brown hair hung around her face like a halo of dark light.

"So you are Scott," she began with a smile. "I am Lady Skalaw."

"I know," I stammered, swallowing hard. "I saw your picture in a magazine. Not one picture, I mean. I saw a lot of pictures in the magazines. Then I saw you in the great hall." I

blushed and felt like an idiot.

"You're shivering," she observed. "I'll turn up the heat while your clothes are brought." She waved a finger as if to alert someone.

That's when I noticed the large mirror on the wall. It was one of those two-way mirrors, I figured. Then I wondered how many people were watching us—and why. "Have I done something wrong?" I asked.

"I don't know," she responded. "Have you?"

"That man dragged me out of my bathtub and brought me here."

"Don't mind Tesdor. He's clumsy and has no sense of timing. But I asked him to bring you to me so we could talk. You want to talk to me, don't you?"

I gazed at her face. "If you want me to."

"Tell me about Draven."

"What about him?"

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me where he was going."

"Then why were you traveling with him?"

"Because he asked me to."

Lady Skalaw paused for a moment, as if reconsidering her questions. "Let's start at the beginning. How and when did you meet him?"

"I met him yesterday." I hesitated, suddenly unsure of myself. "At least, I think it was yesterday. I was lost and came to a farmhouse where some soldiers showed up and hurt a little girl who died, and then they shot up the house with bullets."

"A little girl died?" Skalaw asked with a stern look at the mirror.

"Yes, ma'am. But Draven came and brought her back to life."

Lady Skalaw was silent, but I could feel her eyes on me. Her lips were still fixed into a charming smile. "Draven brought a dead girl back to life?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She chuckled. "You're mistaken, I'm sure."

"No. He did."

"You're certain about that. You saw for yourself that the girl was dead. A doctor came and pronounced her dead. You saw a death certificate for her."

"Well . . . no," I admitted. "But her mother said she was dead."

"Her mother may have been mistaken."

"Maybe. But I don't think so."

Skalaw chuckled again. "You're a remarkable boy. It's easier for you to believe that Draven brought a dead girl to life again rather than to believe that her mother made a mistake? Or maybe it was a lie, a trick, to make you *think* she was brought back to life."

I felt confused. "Maybe it was. I don't know."

"What *do* you know?"

"Not a lot," I confessed. "I only came here a couple of days ago. It's hard to tell because the sun hasn't moved, and I don't have a watch."

"You came here from where?" she asked.

"Show me. There's a map here on the wall—"

"It won't be on your map."

"Why not?"

"Because it's in my world."

"Your world?" She looked at me now with a different expression. It was either skepticism or anger, I couldn't tell for certain. "*Your* world as opposed to *our* world?"

I nodded. "That's right. But don't ask me to explain it because I don't know how it happened. One minute I was in a railroad tunnel in my world, and the next minute I was in *this* world. Draven said I'm here because the Unseen One wanted me to come."

"Oh? And why would the Unseen One want you to do that?"

"I'm not sure. To help Draven, I think."

"To help him do what?"

"I don't know yet."

"You really don't know very much, do you?"

I was a little hurt by that remark. "I'm considered smart in back home," I offered in my defense. "My father teaches at the college, and my mother works for the board of education. They've taught me a lot. But no, I don't know what's going on here—any more than you'd know about my world if somebody suddenly dropped you into it."

Skalaw thoughtfully chewed on her bottom lip. I saw her knuckles go white as she clenched the edge of the desk. I thought she might get up and slap me, but her face never lost

its composure. Finally she said, “Draven wants to meet with my husband. Why?”

“To talk about starting time again.”

“He thinks he has the power to do that?”

“The Unseen One has.”

“You believe in the Unseen One?”

“In our world we call Him God, and yeah, I do.”

“What would you say if I told you that the Unseen One is a myth and that what has happened to the sun is a temporary glitch of nature?”

“The sun has stood still for over three years, and you’d call it a glitch?”

“It has happened before. Millions of years ago. Our scientists have explained it again and again. It’s as natural as an eclipse.”

“I know a lot about astronomy, but I’ve never heard of the sun standing still.”

“If ever you get the chance, ask my husband’s advisers about it,” she suggested. “They think they have it all worked out.”

“I will,” I promised.

She leaned closer on the desk. “Some of us believe there are other forces at work here. Forces greater than the Unseen One. Some of us are empowered by that force.”

“Then why don’t you unstop the sun?”

“We will when the timing is right.”

I frowned. “I thought everyone was miserable. People are sick but can’t die, you’re running out of food and water, your supreme commander can’t even feed his horses. When will the timing be right?”

“When our collective consciousness becomes enlightened,” she answered significantly.

“Huh?”

“You see, your Draven friend has it all wrong. There isn’t a single god called the Unseen One. There is the accumulation of all beings, all our souls and all our collective power, into one great—”

“Force?” I asked.

“That’s how I think of it, yes.”

“Does this mean I’ll get to meet Luke Skywalker and Obi Wan?” I asked with a smile.

She sighed heavily as she stood up. “I can tell by your

tone that you're mocking me." She circled the desk until she was right next to me. I could smell her perfume. Then, faster than I could have imagined, she had my hair in her hand. She yanked my head back quickly and painfully.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch . . ." I muttered.

"Don't taunt me, *boy*." She ran a fingernail, long and sharp, across my exposed throat. "I won't be taunted."

"I'm sorry," I said.

She let go of my hair. "How does Draven think he's going to start time again? What trick is he going to pull?"

"He didn't tell me. To be honest, he hasn't told me much of anything."

"And yet you're supposed to help him?"

"That's what he said."

She moved away with her hands clasped behind her back. She wiggled her wrists so that her bracelets jangled. Then she turned to me again. "Many of our ancient texts have written about children from other times and worlds coming to our world to accomplish miracles."

"I heard something about that too," I offered, now wanting to be as helpful as I could.

"Perhaps *you're* the means by which time will start again," she suggested.

I hadn't thought of that.

"But if you're not around to help Draven, he can't accomplish his trickery." She wasn't talking to me anymore. She was facing the mirror and thinking out loud to whoever watched from the other side. "If we hide this boy away, it might thwart whatever tricks Draven has up his sleeve. Or, since he is from another world, we might be able to kill him."

That was my cue. I sprang from the chair and raced at the hidden panel in the wall. I figured it was better to get lost in those corridors than to hang around and let them hurt me. Unfortunately, the door didn't open. I slammed into it with a hard thud and stumbled back, falling to the floor.

Skalaw laughed. "You stupid boy!"

The bump on my forehead throbbed all over again.

Skalaw went to the regular door and opened it. "I think we should kill him if we can," she announced and walked out. In an instant, several uniformed men came in. The big one called Tesdor grabbed me by the robe and jerked me to my feet.

“I hate killing kids,” he said sadly, “but orders is orders.”



“You’re making a big mistake!” I told the men as they dragged me down the hall.

“Shut up,” Tesdor mumbled.

Still shivering from the cold and from fear, I shouted, “But you *can’t* kill me!”

Tesdor grunted, “We can try.”

We rounded a corner and found ourselves face-to-face with Mobeck, Ladan, and an entourage of guards. “Ah! Just the people we were looking for!” Mobeck exclaimed.

Tesdor dropped me and, along with the other men, saluted. “Supreme Commander!” they said in unison.

“Where are you going with the boy, Tesdor?” Mobeck asked.

“Lady Skalaw has given us instructions to kill the boy,” Tesdor replied honestly.

“I think you may have misunderstood her instructions.”

“But she said very clearly—”

“*You misunderstood her,*” Mobeck said more firmly.

“Yes, Supreme Commander.”

“Go about your business,” Mobeck ordered them.

Tesdor tipped his head to the other soldiers, and they turned and marched down the hallway.

Mobeck cast a steely look at Ladan. “And in the future, Ladan,” he said sternly, “I suggest you keep a closer eye on your guests.”

“Yes, Supreme Commander,” Ladan replied, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief. “Come along, Scott. It wasn’t very polite of you to leave your bath like that.”

“But—”

Ladan gave me a hard tug, and we headed away from Mobeck and his guards.

“I don’t get it,” I said softly as we walked, still shivering.

“Adimah told me that you were missing. I told Mobeck. We both knew Lady Skalaw was behind it.”

“But isn’t she going to be mad at Mobeck?”

“Mobeck is used to that. The two of them sneak around each other all the time.” Ladan gestured to another hall, and we followed it.

“But why would Mobeck protect me?”

“Mobeck wants to have a showdown with Draven, and he’s afraid that if you’re hurt or locked up, Draven will go back into hiding.”

“He *wants* to have a showdown?”

“He’s consulted with the greatest scientists of our age. They say that the timing of Draven’s challenge is perfect. They say they have the technology to show him up for the fraud he really is.”

“Wait a minute!” I said, unsure if I’d heard him right. “They think they know how to start time moving again?”

“Yes.”

I shook my head. “But Lady Skalaw thinks it’s a natural event, like an eclipse or sunspots or something. She thinks that if everyone collects their conscious-whatevers, they’ll start time again.”

“I’ve heard that story before.”

We were at the door to Ladan’s apartment now. “Lady Skalaw thinks Draven might start time again by using *me* somehow.”

“Perhaps he will.”

“So you don’t know what’s going to happen either?”

“No, I don’t.” Ladan opened the door and allowed me to go in first. “As you’ve probably guessed, there’s no love lost between Draven and me.”

“Why? You’re both believers in the Unseen One.”

“True. But we go about our belief in two different ways.”

Adimah scurried down the hall toward us. “Thank the Unseen One!” he nearly shouted.

“Let him finish his bath, but *stay with him* this time,” Ladan commanded. “And put some kind of lock on that secret panel. I’m tired of people coming in and out whenever they want.”

Adimah bowed slightly and led me back to the bathtub. He'd obviously topped it off with hot water, and I slid in with the same sense of warmth and comfort as I'd had before. It was a relief after everything that had happened.

Afterward, Adimah presented me with my own clothes, cleaned and dried. When I had dressed, he took me into a small dining room, where I ate silently with Ladan. Then Adimah took me back to the guest bedroom and laid out some pajamas for me to wear. When I was snug in bed, he sat down in a nearby chair. His body was tense, as if he expected someone to try to nab me again. I could hear Ladan pacing back and forth in the hall.

"He's a pretty nervous guy," I observed about Ladan.

"I'd be nervous too, if I were in his shoes," Adimah said. "He's under a lot of pressure. Imagine being the only recognized priest for the Unseen One in this country."

"But what good is it if he's under Mobeck's thumb?"

Adimah was instantly indignant. "Who told you that?" he demanded.

"It was the impression I got," I replied sheepishly.

Adimah snorted. "Draven thinks everyone should be a radical like he is. He believes challenge and confrontation are the only way to deal with Mobeck."

"Ladan doesn't?"

"Ladan works from *within* the system, influencing Mobeck from here. Ladan is not what he appears to be. He's a courageous man."

"Really?"

Adimah leaned closer to the bed and said in a half whisper, "A few years ago, before Draven came along, Lady Skalaw argued that speaking out on behalf of the Unseen One was a crime against the state. She decided to purge the country of anyone who professed to be a voice for Him. Hundreds of people were in danger. But Ladan, at great risk, helped them to secretly escape and hide. They are alive and safe to this day because of Ladan. That's how he works. And though it's different from Draven's approach, both have their places in the work of the Unseen One. I believe, in fact, that Draven is alive today because Ladan reminds Mobeck of his dormant faith."

I didn't know how to respond, so I lay quietly. Soon I was asleep. If I had any dreams, I didn't remember them the

next day.

Morning came with Adimah waking me for a breakfast of powdered eggs and toast that tasted like cardboard. After that, there was a chaotic scramble as Ladan got ready for us to leave. He didn't know if the occasion called for his usual suit or his priestly robes. He finally decided on his suit. And then there was a question about which car he and I would ride in, Mobeck's or one of the cars that would follow. Eventually it was all sorted out, and we got into Mobeck's limousine in front of the palace.

"Did you sleep well?" Mobeck asked me.

I said that I had.

"Good."

"Where is Lady Skalaw?" Ladan asked.

Mobeck smiled. "I persuaded my wife to leave this particular meeting to me."

We drove out of Sarum and followed a major highway toward Hailsham. Fields and villages zoomed past, and after about 20 minutes, we came to a gate with a sign saying, "The Field of the Great Kings." A small road wound through the park, taking us past vast lawns, an occasional statue, fields with grazing deer—"Royal deer," Mobeck explained, "so it's a crime to kill them"—and then into a deeply wooded area. We stopped and got out, and only then did I realize that all the cars that had been following us had disappeared.

"Maiden's Bridge is that way," the driver informed Mobeck, pointing.

Mobeck glanced at his watch. "Ten o'clock. Right on time."

We followed a dirt path farther into the woods. Maiden's Bridge was a small wood bridge that sat over what had been a stream but was now a dry bed. Several large oak trees, their fat branches bare, stood over us.

Mobeck, Ladan, and I walked to the center of the bridge and stopped. Mobeck leaned against the railing and looked around casually. I wondered if he was up to something. What had become of all those other cars following us? Was he planning a trick or a trap for Draven? I glanced at Ladan. As usual, he was nervously patting his forehead with his handkerchief.

"I'm glad you could make it," we suddenly heard Draven say.

Startled, the three of us turned around on the bridge to look for him, but he wasn't anywhere we could see.

"Is that the troublemaker?" Mobeck called out.

"You started the trouble when you compromised your faith in the Unseen One," Draven said.

"Where are you?" Mobeck asked.

Draven laughed. "I haven't come all this way to be tricked by your feeble plan. I know the park is surrounded by your soldiers. Are they under orders to shoot me or to take me alive?"

"Take you alive, of course," Mobeck admitted. "You're no good to me dead."

"I'm no good to you alive, either," Draven countered.

"Then come out and say what you have to say." Mobeck was now looking around the bridge, leaning over the rail as if to see if Draven was underneath. Instead he found a speaker lodged into the woodwork. With brute force, he pulled it out and held it up for us to see.

"That's right," Draven said. "I'm broadcasting my voice."

Mobeck held the speaker up even higher. "But you can see me, can't you?" he asked. "You're somewhere nearby."

"Maybe I am, and maybe I'm watching you by other means. But we're not going to get very far in our conversation at this pace. Send your guards away or I'll leave you now, and time will remain just as it is."

Mobeck pounded his fist against the rail angrily. "By the two moons! You're going to dictate terms to *me?"*

"Yep."

Mobeck thought about it for a moment, then held up his hand, circled his finger in the air, and jerked his thumb. Whatever he meant by the signal, suddenly soldiers appeared from behind trees and moved away. I heard car engines start in the distance and the sound of tires spinning on gravel. Everyone was leaving.

"Are you satisfied?" Mobeck asked Draven.

"Thank you," he replied.

"Now tell me what you want."

"I want to meet you and all your so-called advisers tomorrow at noon at the University of Hailsham."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes. You may even bring all of Skalaw's pagan priests.

And I want you to bring all the national radio and television networks."

"That's quite a tall order. I don't know if I can assemble everyone in such a short time."

"Nonsense. Most of them came to Sarum for your banquet last night."

Mobeck chuckled. "And why should I bring everyone to meet you?"

"Because you want time to start moving again."

"And how do I know you can do that?" Mobeck asked.

"You don't. But in front of the entire nation, I'm going to challenge all your best minds—your scientists and technicians and even your wife's bogus priests—to try to release time. And when they can't, the Unseen One will."

"I see. You're challenging us to a contest."

"Exactly," Draven agreed. "And don't be so boring as to try any tricks to catch me in the meantime."

Mobeck hesitated, then said, "All right, I won't. Is there anything else you want from me?"

"You and Ladan should walk to your car without looking back," Draven instructed.

"What about the boy?"

"Leave him here on the bridge."

"If you insist." Mobeck spun on his heel and strode off the bridge.

"Draven," Ladan suddenly called out.

"Yes?"

"Is there anything you want *me* to do?"

"Yes," he answered. "Try to keep out of the way."

Ladan turned a bright red and stormed off toward the car. I glanced around, wondering what would happen next. Mobeck and Ladan were nearly out of sight down the path. Suddenly a loop of rope fell down from above me.

"Grab on," Draven said softly.

I put my arm through the loop and was pulled far up into the thick branches of the oak tree. I hadn't realized how big they were, but obviously they were large enough for Draven to sit up there without being seen, because there he was at the other end of the rope.

"Watch," Draven whispered and pointed toward a clearing through the branches. Ladan was just getting into the limousine. But Mobeck turned and took one last look at the

bridge. He squinted and craned his neck. Then, when he saw I had gone, his mouth fell open and he looked quickly around. It didn't seem to occur to him to look up. If he had, he might have seen the two of us smiling at him. Clearly annoyed, Mobeck got into the limousine, and it sped away.

"Let's relax for a few minutes, just to make sure they leave the park," Draven said, lying back into the crook of two branches with his hands behind his head.

"Why didn't Mobeck or his men think to look for you in the trees?" I wondered aloud.

"Because it's too simple," Draven said sarcastically. "The simple things are too much for a mind like Mobeck's to cope with. He expects some cunning trickery or a complicated scheme."

"I guess that explains why he thinks it's easier to believe in science and technology than to believe in the Unseen One," I offered.

"I suppose so."

We waited in the tree for about a half hour, and then Draven signaled for me to follow him. We crawled across from one branch to another, and then from tree to tree, until I couldn't see the bridge anymore.

"I used to do this when I was a boy," he said happily.

Then, like a couple of squirrels, we scurried down to the ground. We were in front of a small caretaker's shed, which was made out of cinder blocks and had an iron door. Draven pulled open the door, and we went inside. It was jammed with equipment for the park—a lawn mower, rakes, shovels, tools, and the like. In the center of the floor was a grate. Draven lifted it.

"A tunnel?" I asked.

Draven nodded. "You go first. There's a long ladder attached to the wall. Climb down and wait at the bottom. Don't mind the dark—or the rats."

"Rats?" I gulped.

"They don't bite," he said, smiling. "They only nibble."

With a shiver, I made my way down the ladder and stayed as close to the small shaft of light from above as I could. Draven followed, pausing only to put the grate back in place.

Joining me at the bottom, he produced a small flashlight from his jacket pocket. He turned it on and pointed

it ahead of us into the drainage tunnel. “Be careful of the puddles,” he advised.

We walked through a maze of tunnels—I never saw a single rat, by the way—and eventually came out into the open air again at the edge of the park. A motorcycle was leaning against a wall.

“This is yours?” I asked.

Draven handed me a helmet and put on one of his own. “Climb on,” he said.

“Cool.”

We buzzed down the highway to the small village called Hailsham. It contained shops and restaurants that looked tailored for the young, smart students from the nearby university. Men in black-and-red uniforms and suits of the same colors milled around. Women in sharp outfits of red tops and black skirts joined them. We passed by an ornate railroad station that stood in the middle of the village like a proud dog. On the outskirts of Hailsham, we came to a road with a lot of ruts and potholes. I had to hang on tight for fear I might bounce off the back of the motorcycle.

At the end of the road sat a run-down cottage covered with vines. “This is the place,” Draven said as we climbed off the motorcycle. “We’ll stay here until our big showdown tomorrow.”

I looked around. The house sat near brown hills and an overgrown patch of trees that looked out onto a valley. Through the thicket, I could make out Hailsham in the center of the valley, and beyond that was an impressive collection of buildings I hadn’t seen from the road. “What are those?” I asked, pointing.

“The grand and prestigious University of Hailsham,” Draven replied derisively. “Once upon a time, in the days of Arin, Hailsham was the center of all that was supposed to be right and good about Marus. Weapons of mass destruction were created there, only to be undone by the Unseen One and leveled to the ground. For years this was beautiful countryside once again. But since the rise of Mobeck, it has become the largest education center in West Marus, spouting the supposed wisdom and advancements of the age. It’s the perfect venue for this final showdown.” He paused as a smile crept across his face. “Besides, it has the largest clock in the nation.”

The cottage had a thatched roof and, where I could see

through the thick vines, was mostly white. It had shuttered windows and dark, vertical beams of timber that ran from the roof to the ground. It made me think of a picture I'd once seen of a Tudor cottage in England.

Then something dawned on me. "They're green!" I said to Draven, pointing to the vines. "Is this cottage outside time too?"

Draven nodded, then paused at the cottage door and said like a prayer, "May we always remember the Old Judge's strength." He patted the wooden door frame affectionately and then lifted the latch on the thick oak door and pushed it open.

Dust sprayed over us as Draven shoved aside the curtains and threw open the windows and shutters. A damp chill filled my bones. Shelves and paintings hung cockeyed from the dark paneled walls. A fireplace nearly filled one wall, and two patched-up chairs sat on a faded carpet. A large hutch sat off to the side, but whatever had once filled its shelves was long gone. I was surprised to see a grandfather clock in the corner. I was even more surprised to see that it was still working, its arm swinging back and forth. I assumed that Draven often stayed here and wound the clock himself.

A second room contained a sink, a stove, and some cupboards. I saw a large bed through one doorway and a smaller one through a second doorway, and a third door was closed.

"Is this your cottage?" I asked. "Is that why it's outside time?"

Draven went into the kitchen and filled a kettle with some water. "This cottage once belonged to a great voice of the Unseen One," he explained. "He was called the Old Judge. He was influential in the reign of King Lawrence and the rise of Darien, our greatest king."

"Marus has a pretty long history."

"Thousands of years."

"I like history. Do you have any books I can read about it?"

"You can check in there," Draven said, nodding toward the closed door.

The room was packed with buckling shelves of books, old boxes, and trunks filled with clothes. The mustiness made me cough, but the books, with their leather bindings and gold-

leaf lettering, made me feel as if I'd come upon a giant treasure. I had fallen in love with reading because of my parents, so I couldn't help but think of them now. They would have drooled over this room.

I found one book whose title claimed to give an account of the history of Marus and took it back into the living room.

"Did you find anything?" Draven asked from the kitchen. From the sound of it, he was making us lunch.

"This one," I answered, holding up the book. "It's called *A Concise History of Marus: From Its Beginnings to the Present Time.*" I flipped to the back of the book. "It looks like it goes to the time of Darien's rule as king."

"That's a couple of hundred years ago. But reading up to that point should keep you busy."

So I began to read. And there, in short, terse sentences, was the amazing history of the nation of Marus. It began with the creation of all the world by the Unseen One and the story of how the original man and the original woman were duped by a serpent in a tree and ousted from paradise. I read about the stretch of years after that, which led up to an age of true knowledge, when it seemed as if mankind had reached a pinnacle—only to allow wickedness and a denial of the Unseen One to lead them to self-worship. This period should have been glorious, but it became the Age of Apostasy. The Unseen One sent a man called Arin, His voice—what we would call a prophet in our world, I realized—to beg the nation to repent. But the people refused. Then came a mysterious boy, sent by the Unseen One from another world, to bring judgment and destruction to Marus. Only Arin and his family were saved. The book didn't say what happened to the boy.

Draven gave me a sandwich of something that tasted like roast beef and some vegetables, and he didn't seem to mind that I wanted to keep reading while I ate.

A man named Marus was called by the Unseen One to establish a nation of true believers. Another "mystery child" came to help him with his travels to what would become the capital city of Sarum. I then learned that *Sarum* is a slight variation on "Marus" spelled backward and was so named because Marus had doubted the Unseen One and did the opposite of what he'd been told to do when moving into the land.

There were stories of the growth of Marus and the years when its leaders did not lead or did not obey the Unseen One, and chaos ensued. Out of the chaos came new people of faith, including a young man named Glennall who was betrayed by his own family and sold into slavery, but who rose to power with the help of yet another mysterious child from another world.

"This is the story of Joseph!" I said, growing excited at the connection. "This is just like a story from our Bible."

"Your what?" Draven asked.

"The Bible! It's the book that tells the story of God and a nation called Israel."

Draven nodded thoughtfully. "Then the Unseen One is working in your world, too."

"Yeah!" I said, then thought about it. "But why would He do the same things in this world as He did in ours? I mean, it's one thing to have parallel worlds, but to have the same kinds of things happen in them seems a little strange."

Draven shrugged. "Maybe it has more to do with the flaws of creation than with the Unseen One—just as a doctor may have to treat similar diseases in similar ways but in different parts of the world."

I shook my head, puzzled.

Draven turned to the window. "I'm not inclined to second-guess the Unseen One, but some of our great philosophers have suggested some theories. Berlion, whose books of wisdom are included in our Sacred Scrolls, wrote that time, space, and the existence of other worlds and dimensions are to be expected in a vast creation. He said, and I quote, 'We exist in the same pool, with events rippling back and forth between us, our reflections dancing in the water as pale imitations of the full truth of the Unseen One and His purposes. And as long as we remain under the watchful eye of the Unseen One, who is God of all realms and all worlds, then we may live in a full faith, in harmony with the unknown. For we are *all* in the care of the Unseen One.'"

I thought about what he had said for a while, but I couldn't decide whether I agreed with it. I'm not even sure I understood it. But it *sounded* good, so I went back to the book. I read about how three mysterious children had brought about the signs that helped the great deliverer Fendar lead the Marutians from slavery and back to Marus.

“Why don’t they ever say their names?” I impatiently asked Draven, who was still looking out the window.

“Whose names?”

“The names of the children who came from other worlds to help your people.”

He shrugged. “I was taught that the names of the children were never to be spoken for fear that the people would honor them over the Unseen One who had brought them.” Then he added, “But the names are known among the voices of the Unseen One.”

“Then what were the names of the children who helped Fendar?”

Draven turned to me and said with a smile, “I said the names are known among the *voices* of the Unseen One. You are not a voice yet, are you?”

“But it’s not fair,” I complained. “I’ll bet some of these kids are from *my* world. I might even know who they are!”

Draven smiled again. “You’ll have to be patient.”

I returned to the history book. Confusion continued as the people of Marus vacillated between belief and unbelief in the Unseen One, even as His leaders gave them the length and breadth of Marus. Another child assisted Emit as he conquered parts of the land. Still other children came at crucial points when it seemed as if all were lost. Neighboring countries took advantage of Marus’s internal squabbles and invaded, but heroes arose to fight them. There was Chantall in the south, who battled with the Palatians. There was also Fletcher in the north, who, with the help of a girl and a boy from another world, drove out their oppressors. Then came the Old Judge and King Lawrence and a brother and a sister—a protector and a voice—who helped Darien rise to power.

I closed the book. According to the clock, it was now early evening. Draven hadn’t moved from his place at the window.

I wanted to ask Draven what had happened in Marus after Darien, but he looked as if he were contemplating the secrets of the universe. “Is something wrong?” I asked instead.

Draven continued to gaze out the window, and his voice took on a soft, deliberate tone. “Some of the voices have spoken about the mystery of a great sacrifice, one which shattered the boundaries of time and space. It was a single act by a single man that will eventually bring all worlds together

under one faith. Mathan, a voice of old, called it the Final Victory."

"Wait a minute, you said that like it's already happened."

"It has."

"When? Is it in this book?"

"No. It has happened, but it hasn't been revealed to us. Mathan, who some believed could see into the future, wrote that the Unseen One will reveal the Final Victory when He thinks the time is right. Meanwhile, we have to wait."

I took a deep breath of excitement as I suddenly realized what the great sacrifice was. "I think I know what it is, Draven," I told him.

He turned to me, a sad expression on his face. "I suspect that you do. I suspect that all the children from your world have known."

"Do you want me to tell you?"

"No," he replied. "The Unseen One will tell us when He's ready—when *we're* ready."

"But I could tell you now."

"No! Don't you see? Telling me now, before the right time, could be catastrophic. It could bring untold disaster on all of us." He shoved his hands deep into his jacket pockets and frowned. "Our purpose is to play out our parts in *this* time, in *this* place, to the best of our abilities. The future belongs to the Unseen One. Now, don't say any more. We have a job to do." He strode across the floor and out the front door. I went to the window and watched him walk toward the fields. His shoulders shook as he walked. I wondered if he was crying.

He didn't return until later that night, after I'd crawled into the smaller bed. I heard him pacing the floor. Then he went to bed too.

I thought about the pacing. Draven had done it just as Ladan had the night before. And then it occurred to me that they hadn't been pacing only. They had been praying.

Is he worried about tomorrow? I wondered. *Maybe he's nervous that something will go wrong.*

I sure would be, I concluded as I stared at the ceiling the rest of the night.



At 11 o'clock the next morning, we walked across the fields toward Hailsham and the university. I felt woozy from my lack of sleep the night before, or maybe I was nervous with excitement. Draven walked with a grim determination on his face.

The University of Hailsham was a collection of large buildings embellished with crests, statues, and comical-looking gargoyles that sat hunched over the rooftops and watched us with leering smiles. In the center sat the main administrative building with its high tower, and in the tower was the clock Draven had mentioned to me. It was gigantic. I noticed that its hands were stopped at 7:04.

"Why isn't the clock working?" I asked Draven.

"It's a specially designed solar clock," he replied. "It stopped when the sun stopped."

Mobeck's people had been hard at work since yesterday. Scaffolding had been erected as a temporary stage in front of the clock, with hundreds of seats positioned on the broad mall in front of that. Technicians were busy setting up microphones, loudspeakers, and cameras. People turned to us as we approached, whispering and pointing. We stopped at the edge of the main stage.

"I want you to find a seat here," Draven said to me. "If anything goes wrong, run for your life."

"Can something go wrong?" I asked in surprise.

Draven smiled. "Something can *always* go wrong." Then he went over to a guard at the foot of the stage. "I'm Draven," I heard him say.

The guard nodded. "Follow me," he instructed.

They walked up a set of makeshift stairs to the top of the stage. The guard showed Draven to a seat and then asked

him a few questions that Draven answered by shaking his head yes or no. After the guard left, Draven waited calmly and patiently, watching the workers add the final touches of artificial plants and decorative banners to the stage.

Eventually a small brass band came and set up in a semicircle of chairs on the other side of the stage. People arrived for the showdown, and before I had realized it, the hundreds of seats behind me were filled. Those who couldn't find seats crowded in around the sides and at the back. Some country folk had brought in horse-drawn wagons and allowed people to sit in them for a clearer view.

The leader of the band received a cue from somewhere and suddenly waved his baton at the players. They struck up a tune I'd never heard before, but it must have been some kind of formal theme, because everyone stood up. A procession of people dressed in academic robes marched down the long steps of the main university building. I figured they must be Mobeck's advisers. On and on they came, at least a couple hundred of them, and took their seats along the back of the stage, passing Draven along the way. One or two of them even tried to talk to him. Draven ignored them.

I looked for Ladan but couldn't see him in the sea of faces.

Then Mobeck came, waving to the crowd, whose members now applauded wildly, whistled, and shouted their appreciation. He strode up the steps of the stage and went straight to the microphone. The television cameras quickly focused on him. The band stopped playing, and everyone sat down.

"My fellow citizens—great Marutians all!" he shouted.

All the people leaped to their feet again and applauded.

He waved them down. "It is in the spirit of goodwill and tolerance that I welcome you all here today." He turned to one of the cameras and added, "And I welcome our listening and viewing audience as well. What a glorious day!"

The audience cheered, and I wondered what could be glorious about the day, since it was the same day they'd been experiencing for the past three years.

"My wife sends her regards," Mobeck went on. At the mention of Lady Skalaw, more cheers came. "She has less patience with the antics of our special guest, so she stayed at the palace with her advisers." Mobeck turned toward Draven.

“I ask you. Where else in the world would the supreme commander and his entire government gather at the request of an ordinary citizen?” Mobeck then forced a chuckle. “No, I correct myself. He is not an ordinary citizen. He is Draven, whom I affectionately call my *troublemaker*.”

The crowd jeered and booed Draven.

Mobeck held up his hands in mock rebuke. “Now, now, none of that. Draven means well, I’m sure. He is a victim of a rigid upbringing, having been brainwashed from an early age to believe in old superstitions.”

The crowd laughed now. Draven sat in stony silence, his legs crossed casually, his hands cradling his knee. His face betrayed no emotion.

“But he demanded that we meet together today to hear him once more. And I’ve graciously obliged,” Mobeck said, then turned to Draven. “The microphone is yours, my *troublemaker*.”

The crowd applauded as Mobeck went to his chair and sat down. Draven stood up and walked purposefully to the front of the stage. He adjusted the microphone to his height—he was taller than Mobeck—and gently cleared his throat. He spoke in a low, clear voice that seemed to penetrate the very walls surrounding us.

“People of Marus, how long will you waver in your faith in the Unseen One? The choice is clear. You can follow Mobeck and Skalaw to your destruction, or you can follow the Unseen One to salvation. Which will it be?”

The crowd was still.

“I am the one voice of the Unseen One remaining, but Mobeck has *hundreds* of advisers. Look at them! The brightest and the best of Marus, or so Mobeck claims. Yet for over three years they have been unable to undo what the Unseen One accomplished with a flick of His finger. By His word, the sun stopped in the sky so that you would know His power and understand the consequences of your infidelity.”

He paused for a moment. I could feel the crowd move in their seats.

“Today is the day of reckoning!” Draven exclaimed and pointed at the large clock. “I challenge Mobeck and all his advisers to now prove their worth. If they can start that clock again, they deserve to be followed by the entire world, and I will retreat, never bothering you again.”

The audience applauded this statement.

"But," Draven continued sharply, "if they cannot move the hands of this clock by restoring time, you will witness today the terrifying power of the Unseen One. Choose whom you will believe!"

Draven returned to his chair and sat down.

Mobeck stood up, bowed formally to Draven, then went to the microphone. He had to adjust it down again, then said, "As usual, my advisers were more than happy to rise to this challenge. For they have not been idle for the past three years but have been working day and night to study, explore, and come to understand this event. To begin, I'd like to introduce Dr. Quartis, the head of a team that has focused on the psychological ramifications. Dr. Quartis?"

A short man with thick red hair and a scraggly beard came forward.

"Explain your theory to them, please," Mobeck said.

Dr. Quartis blew into the microphone a couple of times to make sure it was working. "Greetings, everyone," he began. "My colleagues and I have been considering the unique nature of our problem. We asked ourselves, has the sun truly stopped in the sky or has something *else* happened? Is it possible that reality itself has not changed but that our *perception* of reality has?"

"The hands of the clock are not moving!" Draven called out to the doctor.

Dr. Quartis continued, "Some of us believe that three years ago, this man Draven, with the help of foreign agents, infected our water supplies with a special hypnotic drug. At the time, we were alarmed to discover traces of it in the streams, in our water tanks, and in our water recycling centers. With that drug, Draven was able to facilitate mass hypnosis."

Titters and laughter spread out around the crowd. "Are you saying we've been *hypnotized* for the past three years?" someone shouted. "Everyone in the world has been hypnotized?"

Dr. Quartis waved his hands at them. "Hear me out! We have proof, evidence of this diabolical scheme! Draven and his accomplices have created mass hysteria through drugs and hypnotism!"

Draven cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted

again, “The hands of the clock are still not moving!”

Some of the crowd laughed, and others began to hoot and holler at Dr. Quartis.

Undaunted, he reached into the pocket of his robe and pulled out a small bottle. “We have produced an antidote. If everyone would drink this and embark on a nationwide course of therapy, we will correct our perceptions of reality! And then you will see that the sun has been rising and setting as it always has!”

The abuse from the crowd turned into an uproar. Dr. Quartis pleaded with them to let him speak further. Mobeck, seeing that the doctor had lost his audience, went up to him and persuaded him to sit down again. He motioned the audience to be quiet.

“Is that the best you can do?” Draven asked when the crowd had calmed down.

Mobeck answered, “It is a mark of our open-mindedness that we have explored all possibilities. I have found Dr. Quartis’s theories interesting and helpful. Do me the courtesy of refraining from childish behavior, or my guards will dismiss this audience.”

The people, knowing a threat when they heard one, went completely still.

“Now I would like us to listen to one of Marus’s most-eminent astronomers, Dr. Probam,” Mobeck said sternly.

A slender man with thick glasses, a wiry smile, and short gray hair came to the microphone. “Thank you, Supreme Commander,” he started. He shoved his hands into his robe pockets and looked like a college instructor addressing a classroom of students. “Those of us who study the stars have been considering the many planetary configurations of the past three years. The universe, as you know, is a vast mechanism, not unlike a clock—”

“Speaking of *clocks*,” Draven interrupted and hooked a thumb at the large solar clock.

“Draven, please,” Dr. Probam complained. “Professional respect, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t think you’re a professional, nor do you deserve respect,” Draven said.

Dr. Probam ignored him. “I’ll come straight to the point. It is the considered opinion of the world’s leading astronomers that what has happened with the sun is a purely natural

phenomenon. It is part of the cycle of the universe, no different from the passing of the seasons, that once every few thousand years, the rotation of the planet slows down to what seems to us a complete stop. We have records dating to the pre-Catastrophic Era that show that—"

Draven yawned loudly in an exaggerated manner and turned to look at the clock again.

Dr. Probam lost his patience. "Listen to me, you charlatan! We know your tricks. You tell us that the Unseen One will restore time, but *we* say that time will restore itself!"

"Oh, really?" Draven asked. "When?"

"By our calculations, the planet will resume its rotation in another 14 years."

"Fourteen years!" many in the audience cried.

"Yes! And then you'll see that it has nothing to do with nonsense about judgmental gods or ancient deities!" Dr. Probam turned to Draven again, his face red with anger. "And if it were up to me, you'd be publicly executed right here and now!"

Mobeck approached Dr. Probam and whispered something in his ear. The doctor nodded and sat down. Mobeck sidled up to the microphone again. "Thank you, Dr. Probam," he said, casting a steely gaze at the unruly members of the crowd.

"You're stalling, Mobeck," Draven challenged. "The hands of the clock have still not moved."

Mobeck smiled cruelly, and for the first time, I saw how much his face resembled a wolf's. "You taunt us, but you'll soon regret your words," he returned.

Draven lifted his eyebrows as if to say, "Will I?"

"Marutians!" Mobeck shouted dramatically. "I allowed Dr. Quartis and Dr. Probam to speak to you as a prelude to this next gentleman. He is considered by all to be the greatest mind of our age, and he has not only sorted out the problem but has also created a solution! Dr. Balama!"

The crowd erupted in frenzied applause. I searched the seats of robed advisers to see who would stand, but no one did. Then I realized that he hadn't come in with the rest. A tall man with a burst of white hair and a long white beard walked slowly from the main university building. He descended the stairs, circled the stage, and joined Mobeck at the microphone. He looked terribly uncomfortable about

being there and waved a hand at the audience as if hoping they would calm down or go away.

Mobeck adjusted the microphone for him and took a couple of steps back.

Dr. Balama looked shyly at the audience for a moment, his cheeks red from embarrassment. Finally, the people grew quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dr. Balama said in a voice soft and earnest, "we—I mean the scientists and advisers assembled here—have taken seriously the task put before us. Time has stopped, and we must start it again. For over three years we have studied the problem. We took to heart Dr. Quartis's theories about mass hypnotism and agree that our *friend* Draven and other conspirators used artificial means to bring fear to our hearts. We agree with Dr. Probam that this is nothing more than a natural phenomenon, one which Draven and his fellow traitors knew about and exploited by attributing it to the judgment of the Unseen One."

He paused to touch a handkerchief to his lips, then continued, "Men in times past have done the same. In days of old, men claimed that the Unseen One had judged our world and destroyed it through the words of Arin. We now know that an unknown virus, one to which they had no resistance or immunity, destroyed that world. So you see? It was a natural phenomenon that unscrupulous men used to promote their outdated faith."

I looked at Draven, wondering what he was thinking about this quiet attack on him. For a second we made eye contact, and he winked at me.

Dr. Balama went on. "The difference between then and now is that we have the intelligence, the skill, and the resources to refute the old ways of thinking. This natural phenomenon"—here he waved his hand at the clock—"may well take 14 years to undo itself. But we do not have the patience for that. We must take the course of events, our *destiny*, into our own hands."

Draven sat up impatiently. "I hope the hands of that clock start moving faster than your hands!" he said.

Dr. Balama giggled. "They will move, dear Draven," he replied. "They will move."

"Tell them how," Mobeck interjected.

"Our scientists and technicians have been working for

the past two years on explosives, bombs which are so powerful that just *one* of them is greater than all the bombs of history put together." Dr. Balama clasped his hands behind his back and waited.

A hush fell over the crowd. No one moved. I'm not sure anyone was breathing. I wondered if this meant that the scientists of Marus had created an atomic bomb or a hydrogen bomb or maybe something even more powerful. Suddenly I was worried.

"Tell them what these bombs will do," Mobeck encouraged the doctor.

"Ah!" he said and held up a bony finger. "We have drilled deep into the earth, in strategic places all over the world—"

"In those countries we're allied with," Mobeck interjected.

"Yes," Dr. Balama said, "and we have put our bombs there. Deep in the earth. And when we explode those bombs, all together at exactly the same time, the rotation of the planet will begin again."

I shook my head, unsure if I had heard what I'd just heard. They were going to *jolt* the planet back into its rotation? Obviously the audience also wondered and began whispering among themselves.

Dr. Balama continued to explain, "We have tested this theory in our laboratory, using the latest technology. The bombs will explode so deeply underground and away from populated areas that no one will be hurt."

Mobeck was smiling again. "When can we do this, Dr. Balama?" he asked, obviously knowing the answer already.

Dr. Balama shrugged. "We are prepared to do it right now," he said casually.

It took a moment for the reality of what he'd said to sink in. Then, like a wave, a buzz went through the audience.

"Thank you, doctor," Mobeck said and took charge of the microphone again. "Ladies and gentlemen, Draven asked us to come together to witness the power of the Unseen One. Well, we've fooled him. We have come together to witness the power of Marutian intelligence and technology over nature itself!" He signaled somebody offstage. "As supreme commander, I order the technicians around the world to prepare the detonators! Bring me the radio activator!"

Is this possible? I wondered, clenching and unclenching my fists nervously.

A soldier came onto the stage with a large box. He set it at Mobeck's feet and then raised an antenna from the back. A thin wire was attached to a smaller box, which the soldier handed to Mobeck.

Mobeck held up the small box. There was a bright-red button on it. "I will push this, and then the world will know!" he declared. He then lifted his hand to the side of his head, and I realized he was wearing some kind of earpiece. "Are we ready?" he asked someone we couldn't see. "Yes, the reports are coming in from all stations," he told the crowd. "All systems are go!"

Draven sat impassively. I wondered if he realized what would happen to him—and to me—if this crazy scheme somehow worked.

With great drama, Mobeck announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, fellow Marutians, viewers from around the world, I give you *time!"*

He pushed the button.



At first I wasn't sure I heard anything at all, because the sound of muffled explosions was so soft. It might have been the roar of a distant ocean wave for all I knew. But then the sound came closer, as if a huge truck were driving past the campus. I thought I felt the ground shake beneath me—or it might have been my knees knocking together.

The sound subsided, and everyone sat in wonder. I looked up at the clock. The hands hadn't moved.

It might have been a minute, maybe two, and then everyone started to get restless. Nothing was happening.

"Be patient," Dr. Balama appealed to the crowd. "It will not happen in an instant."

So we waited, every eye fixed on the hands of the giant clock.

After another five minutes or so, Draven said, "Maybe you need a little more gunpowder in those bombs."

"Don't be ridiculous," Dr. Balama snapped.

The wait continued. Mobeck pressed his hand against his earpiece and said excitedly, "I'm getting a report from Anadia in the far west. Something is happening. Something . . ."

But whatever it was must have stopped, because Mobeck lowered his head. "One of the explosions triggered a small earthquake there," he reported softly.

"At least you got *something* to move," Draven teased. "But the hands on that clock are exactly where they were."

"Do something!" Mobeck snarled at Dr. Balama angrily, then went to his chair and sat down. Dr. Balama shrugged helplessly. Mobeck folded his arms across his chest and pouted like a little boy.

Draven stood up and addressed the advisers. "Is there

anyone else? Do we have any other volunteers to embarrass themselves?"

As if in answer, an odd commotion arose behind the stage, out of sight. First, there was a low *thump, thump* of someone hitting a drum, followed by the shaking of tambourines and a strange chanting. Then I saw Lady Skalaw, dressed in a brightly colored robe, her hair adorned with artificial flowers, march in and around the stage. She was followed by her advisers, men and women, also dressed in brightly colored robes.

"By the two moons!" Mobeck exclaimed and stood up.

Draven watched them come with a smirk on his face. "The show goes on," he said and sat down again.

Lady Skalaw went up on the stage with her entourage, forcing Mobeck and his advisers to move back. Draven refused to budge.

"What are you doing?" Mobeck asked his wife.

"I have been watching this charade with the deepest humiliation," she said into the microphone. "The time has come for the truth to be seen. The people are ready for an end to their suffering and confusion."

The crowd, shaken from their boredom, now applauded her.

"Together we will shake the forces of nature!" she proclaimed. "Everyone here—and everyone watching and listening from their homes—may now join with me, uniting our wills, combining our spirits, and then the planet will move, the sun will slide through the sky as it once did, and the hands on the clock shall turn in harmony with us! Are you ready?" she shouted.

The crowd didn't know how to answer. A few said yes.

Not satisfied with such a feeble response, she shouted again, "Are you ready?"

More in the crowd shouted back, "Yes!"

"We must do this together!" she demanded. "If we will it, if we channel the energy of our collective life force, we will move the world! Will you join with me or not?"

The crowd, getting more excited, said they would.

"Then say it!" she cried. "Say it to the heavens! Say you are ready!"

"We are ready!" the audience called out.

Then the drums and tambourines began a steady,

rhythmic beat, and Skalaw and her advisers began to dance on the stage. The beat intensified, and some of the advisers fell onto the stage, writhing and screaming, with their hands and arms waving wildly.

"I can't *feel* you!" Skalaw shouted at the crowd. "I can't feel your energy!"

Some of the audience began to dance now, waving their arms and kicking their legs in the air.

Draven sat where he was, looking unimpressed. From the looks of it, Mobeck wasn't terribly impressed either.

Skalaw beckoned the drummers and tambourine players to increase the tempo, building it and building it as her advisers and many in the audience worked themselves into a frenzy.

"Channel your energy to me!" she begged. "Give me your power! We will move the hands of time!"

The frenzy continued until people collapsed from exhaustion.

Draven looked up at the clock. "The reception on your channels must not be very good," he jeered. "The clock isn't moving."

Skalaw beckoned to the crowd to try harder, to concentrate, and to pray. Again the drums beat and the tambourines shook, and everyone was whipped into a new frenzy.

Nothing happened.

But Skalaw wouldn't give up. The afternoon wore on with her shouts at the audience, the wild dancing, and the cry for a collective power that wouldn't come. In their deranged movements, her advisers suddenly brought out knives and began to cut their arms.

"We will let our life force free!" they screamed.

Draven watched them and began to laugh. It was a chuckle at first, and then he laughed loud and heartily. The harder Skalaw and her advisers tried to "channel" their energy, the funnier he found it all.

Finally, when everyone had reached a point of total exhaustion, Mobeck went to Skalaw and begged her to go home. "It's no use, my dear," he said.

"No," she gasped. "We can make it happen!"

"You'll make it happen, or you'll all bleed to death," Draven mocked.

Skalaw drew a knife from a sheath in her waistband and lunged at Draven with an angry cry. Mobeck intercepted her just in time, catching her arms and pulling her back. She collapsed wearily to the floor of the stage. Mobeck signaled his soldiers. “Take her home,” he ordered them. She went along without resistance. Her advisers slowly crawled to the rear of the stage.

Draven moved to the microphone. His moment had come.

“Mobeck, you and your stooges and your paid liars have been seen for what you truly are,” he declared. “Today is the day of choice. The people must decide whom they will follow. They have now seen the work of your doctors and scientists. They have witnessed the foolishness of Skalaw’s false religion. The power of man is nothing. Marus will only be as great as the Unseen One allows it to be.”

“Get on with your trick, Draven,” Mobeck said derisively from his chair.

“A trick? You’ll see no tricks here—only miracles.” He gazed at the crowd until many began to squirm in their seats. Then he noticed a guard with a machine gun standing next to the stage. “Are you a good shot with that?” he asked the guard.

“The best,” the man said proudly.

“Good,” Draven replied. “I want you to destroy the clock.”

The guard looked puzzled. “What?”

“Take your machine gun and fire every bullet you have into the clock.”

The guard turned to Mobeck, who was looking decidedly frustrated. “Do whatever he says,” Mobeck ordered.

The guard pointed his weapon and fired away. At first the damage was hard to see, but then the face of the clock began to be chipped away, and shards of glass fell. Then the hands of the clock fell loose and limp, as if the clock itself had shrugged its shoulders and given up. When all was silent again, Draven turned to the crowd.

“What did that prove?” Mobeck challenged.

“Not only would it be a miracle for time to begin again,” Draven answered, “but it would also be a miracle for that clock to run together with time. Yet, so they will.”

He then held up his arms and closed his eyes. “O Lord

of all, Holy One," he prayed aloud. "You have been mercifully patient with those who have turned their backs on You. Show us today that You, the Unseen One, are king over all, and that I have done nothing except by Your power. Restore our lost time. Restore our lost hearts."

Draven stood where he was, his eyes closed and his arms raised. But nothing happened.

Mobeck sat up in his chair, now interested. "This is good," he said.

Draven didn't move.

The shattered clock was exactly the same as it was before. The crowd grew restless again. After an afternoon of nonsense, I figured they might riot now. I looked around uneasily. *Something has to happen*, I thought. The Unseen One wouldn't bring us to this point and let us down. *Please let something happen*, I found myself praying. *Please*.

Mobeck stood up. "This is very funny," he said, then called out to his guards, "Arrest this traitor!"

The guards moved toward Draven, who remained standing with his eyes closed and his arms held up.

"Look!" someone suddenly shouted. "The hand is moving!"

And it was. First, the big hand shifted a little, then fell back, then moved again, slowly creeping up toward the number 9. Then the smaller hand came alive and moved past it, slowly reaching up and past the 12 and continuing around. The larger hand moved more quickly, as if it were in a race with the smaller hand. And then they both spun faster and faster until it seemed as if the entire clock tower started to shake. Suddenly, with an ear-shattering boom, it exploded into a million pieces.

The crowd began to scatter in an uproar. I turned, thinking they were afraid of the clock itself, but then I realized that other things were happening. The sky was ablaze with colors, flickering light and dark as if the sun were rising and setting, rushing to make up for three years of dormancy. I saw not one but *two* moons flying across the sky. Rain suddenly fell in great drops, followed by snow and sleet, thunder and lightning—all at once. People screamed and ran every whichway. Many collapsed to the ground, clutching their heads or their stomachs and crying out in pain. A man who had been sitting behind me suddenly fell to the ground,

and I could have sworn his hair went gray and wrinkles instantly appeared around his eyes and mouth. In rapid succession the trees grew leaves, which then changed colors, fell to the ground, and grew back again. Ivy crawled up the sides of the buildings, changing color and shape as it went. The grass grew under our feet. And meanwhile the sky continued to explode with light and dark.

Time was completely unleashed. The world was catching up the three years it had lost. Everyone and everything was thrown into convulsions of change. It was a terrifying and glorious thing to watch.

But, to my amazement, I didn't feel the effects of any of it.

I looked at Draven, who continued to pray. Mobeck, who'd fallen to his knees and was weeping with his face in his hands, was on the floor of the stage behind Draven.

When things seemed to start calming down, Draven leaned into the microphone and announced to whoever might still be listening, "These people who have led you astray will now pay the price for their apostasy."

I watched with horror as all the doctors, scientists, advisers, and even Skalaw's bizarre entourage suddenly twitched and flopped in their chairs as if they were being zapped with jolts of electricity. Their hair grew long and white, their skin went pale and wrinkled, and then, one by one, they fell over—dead from old age.

While this was happening, Mobeck sprang from the stage and ran to a car at the edge of the campus. He got in, and the car tore away.

"Draven," I shouted above the din, "Mobeck is getting away!"

Draven came down from the stage and gestured toward the horse-drawn wagons on the other end of the mall. "If we ride horses across the fields, we'll be able to catch up to him," he suggested.

"Horses?" I asked. "But I don't ride."

"Don't they teach kids *anything* in your world?" he groaned.

We made our way through the panicked crowd.

"We're going to get soaked," I said as a steady rain began to fall.

The owner of one of the horses seemed only too happy

to let us use the animal, though whether he was truly happy or afraid, I couldn't tell. Draven climbed onto the horse's back.

"But where is Mobeck going?" I asked as Draven pulled me up behind him.

"Sarum will be in complete chaos. He'll try to hide in his private residence, near Deptford," he said. He nudged the horse with his heels, and we were off.

Across the newly green fields we galloped, out of one valley and into another. The rain slowed to a drizzle, but it felt like a full spray as we rode. Now that time had been restored, I could see how lush the country was. I was also dazzled by how much more brilliant the colors seemed than I'd ever seen in my own world. Off to my left, blue skies broke through the dark clouds, and a full rainbow appeared.

"Maybe it's a sign," Draven shouted back to me.

Soon we reached a large plot of land with a low stone wall encircling orchards and vineyards. Draven tugged at the reins and said, "Whoa!" He guided the horse through a small break in the wall but didn't spur it back to speed.

"Why are we slowing down?" I asked.

"We're cutting through the private estate of Gwynn. Out of respect, I don't want to go too fast. Otherwise he might shoot us." Draven kept the horse at a steady pace.

"Why would he shoot us?"

"To protect himself. Mobeck and Skalaw have wanted this land for as long as Mobeck has been in power, and they sometimes send their goons over to try to 'persuade' Gwynn to sell. But he won't. It infuriates Mobeck and Skalaw."

"Why do they want the land so bad?"

"I think they want to build a swimming pool and some tennis courts on it," Draven replied, then spurred the horse to a quicker pace.

"Why don't Mobeck and Skalaw just take it away from him?"

"They wouldn't dare. Gwynn is too influential in Sarum."

Workers in a distant orchard stopped their work to look suspiciously at us. Draven waved in a friendly manner, but they didn't wave back. We reached another stone wall with a gate.

"This leads to Mobeck's private residence," Draven told

me. “Let’s walk from here.”

After clearing the gate, Draven tied the horse to a tree, and we continued on foot. The rain had stopped completely now, but the water dripped from the branches over our heads.

Mobeck’s private residence wasn’t far beyond Gwynn’s orchards. We came around the side of a sizable mansion made of red brick.

“No guards?” I asked.

Draven shrugged.

We circled around to the front of the mansion and stopped near the edge of the driveway leading to the front door. There was no sign of Mobeck’s car.

“We may have gotten here before him,” Draven said.

“What do we do, wait or knock?” I asked.

But the front door opened before Draven could answer. Lady Skalaw emerged from the house, stiff and erect. She was still dressed in the robes she’d worn at the university. Her face was red with rage.

“You dare to show your face here!” she snarled, her hands extended like claws.

I took a step back. My heart raced. I feared her more than anyone else.

Draven didn’t betray any fear at all. He bowed formally, then said, “Lady Skalaw, your time is coming to an end.”

“I should kill you this instant!”

“How? By dancing around me until I died of boredom?”

Skalaw stopped in her tracks as if she’d been slapped in the face. Suddenly she laughed. “You’re full of yourself now, aren’t you?” she said caustically. “Of course you would be. I watched your *magic* show on television. Most impressive.”

“Not nearly as impressive as your own production,” Draven taunted.

“Where is my husband?” she asked. “I assume he has joined your side, spineless fool that he is. The power went off to the television, so I didn’t see the end of your spectacle. I have been waiting for him or my advisers to come and report.”

“Your priests won’t be coming,” Draven told her. “But your husband should be here any minute.”

“Where are my advisers?” she asked, the tension rising in her voice again.

Just then, Mobeck’s car came down the drive toward us.

It screeched to a halt, and Mobeck got out of the driver's seat. He looked wild-eyed and alarmed to see us there with Skalaw.

"What's going on here?" he asked breathlessly.

"I'm here to see that you finish what we began in Hailsham," Draven said. "You saw the undeniable display of the Unseen One's power. And unlike the other liars and false prophets, your lives He has spared."

"Where are my advisers?" Skalaw demanded again.

"They are dead," Mobeck replied.

Draven stepped forward. "Consider yourselves fortunate. The Unseen One has spared you to repent, to lead the nation back to Him."

"*Dead!"* Skalaw shrieked.

Mobeck stepped between Skalaw and Draven and pleaded, "Listen to me, Draven, these things take time. Go away for now, and we'll talk about it another day."

"You killed my advisers?" Skalaw cried out.

"No excuses," Draven said to Mobeck. But I noticed that Draven was keeping an eye on Skalaw. To my surprise, Draven's face seemed to drain of color. Was he afraid?

Mobeck looked nervously at his wife, then back at Draven. "Please. Go for now," he begged. "This isn't a good time."

"Guards!" she screamed loudly as she picked up a stone from the driveway and threw it through one of the front windows. An alarm went off somewhere. "Guards! Guards! I want them seized!" She pointed to us, her long finger shaking with her fury. "I want them *killed*!*"*

"What do we do?" I asked Draven, backing away.

He was backing away too. "I don't know," he stammered.

"You don't know?" I gasped. My legs went wobbly. If he didn't know, who did?

"It wasn't supposed to happen this way," he said.

I could hear voices inside the house. Men were coming.

"Kill them!" Skalaw screamed again and again.

"Draven?" I asked.

"Run," he said. "Run!"

We both dashed into the woods, retracing our path toward Gwynn's estate. Skalaw's voice seemed to penetrate the trees. A man's voice shouted instructions. The guards were giving chase. I heard the sound of a gun firing.

We ran like madmen and lost our direction. We soon came to Gwynn's wall, but we couldn't find the gate, so Draven gave me a leg up and hoisted me nearly the entire way over the wall. He pulled himself up and over and collapsed next to me.

"Where should we go?" I asked.

Draven rubbed his face. "I don't know," he said glumly. "Our horse is on the other side of the wall."

"Will Gwynn help us?"

"I don't know that either."

"What *do* you know?" I snapped, then regretted it. "I'm sorry."

Draven looked at me helplessly. "I thought they would repent," he said softly. "Restoring time was supposed to be the turning point. All was supposed to be well."

"The Unseen One told you that?"

"No. I assumed it." He lowered his head and said, "How could I have been so wrong?"

Skalaw's guards were on the other side of the wall now. "Should we climb over and get them?" one of them asked.

"You must be joking," came the second guard's reply. "Gwynn will shoot us on sight. Now that time has started again, bullets can do damage. For keeps."

"But we're on business for Supreme Commander Mobeck."

"It doesn't matter. We'll have to get some men together and go around to the front gate." With that, the guards left.

"Come on," Draven said. "We'll find a place to hide in the woods, just beyond the orchard."

We crossed a field and moved in among the trees. They looked like apple trees to me, the fruit hanging low and looking delicious. I suddenly felt hungry.

"Farther in," Draven beckoned.

The trees were planted in long rows, so we had to duck behind a tree, then run across a path to the next row, and so on. When we reached the end of the orchard, I could see the woods Draven had mentioned. They were about 100 yards away across an open field.

"Ready for a hard run?" Draven asked.

I wasn't, but I nodded that I was.

"Let's go."

We made a break for it. When we were about halfway

across, however, my foot stepped into a rabbit hole. A sharp pain shot through my ankle, and I fell. “Draven!” I cried out.

Draven pulled me to my feet. “Can you walk?” he inquired.

I put some weight on my ankle, and it really hurt. “I think I sprained it or something,” I reported.

“Grab onto me,” he said as he put his arm around my waist.

We moved forward again but didn’t get far. Off to our right, we heard the thunderous sound of horses’ hooves on the ground. Riders were coming right at us.

“Faster!” Draven urged, pulling me toward the woods. But it was clear we wouldn’t make it in time. The men on horseback were closing in.

Draven stopped. “Too late,” he conceded. “It’s no use.”

We waited as the men pulled their horses up around us. I was relieved to see they weren’t dressed in black-and-red uniforms but as ranch hands. My comfort was short-lived, though. Each man held a rifle.

“Trespassers!” a man with a beard shouted at us. “Come with us.”



Gwynn was a large, broad-shouldered man with close-cropped brown hair and a long mustache. His face was chiseled by years of outdoor work, his eyes narrow and his mouth firm. He wore a three-piece suit with a vest pocket decorated by a fob, which he occasionally fingered but never took the watch out to read the time.

We were in Gwynn's house, in his study, which had dark wallpaper, a few shelves with various kinds of knickknacks, and a rolltop desk that was overrun with papers. He sat at the desk with his legs stretched out and his hands folded across his belly. We were sitting in two chairs across from him. The bearded ranch hand stood at the door, his rifle poised for action.

"I'm not a religious man," Gwynn said to Draven, "but I've always had a high regard for you. Your sense of justice is strong. Your refusal to kowtow to Mobeck or Skalaw is inspiring. I'm sure you know there is no love lost between those two and me."

"I know," Draven replied.

In a voice full of scorn, Gwynn continued, "This land has been in my family for generations, and he wants me to sell it to him so he can build a swimming pool!"

"Mobeck is used to getting what he wants," Draven observed.

"So he is." Gwynn leveled his gaze at us. "But none of this explains what you're doing on my land."

"I assume you know what happened at the university," Draven began.

"I heard it on the radio, at least until the power went off. Then everything went crazy. I still haven't assessed the damage to my orchards. And I can't tell if I've lost livestock or

gained some. We had birth and death all in a matter of minutes." Gwynn pointed to his temples. "This gray hair wasn't here this morning."

"The Unseen One has restored time—and killed the advisers to Mobeck and Skalaw," Draven explained.

"I wager they weren't very happy about that."

"Skalaw wants to kill me in revenge. We came onto your land to escape her guards."

Gwynn frowned. "And in so doing, you've put me in jeopardy for harboring you. Thank you very much."

We heard a knock at the door. The bearded man opened it, and someone whispered to him. He then turned to Gwynn and said, "We've got soldiers from Mobeck and Skalaw at the front door. They're searching for a couple of fugitives."

Gwynn looked at us thoughtfully. I waited, bracing myself to be handed over.

Gwynn instructed, "Tell the soldiers that I have guests and can't be bothered. They must take their search elsewhere. But," he added, "tell them I will be happy to report any fugitives I find once my guests have left."

The bearded man nodded and went out of the room.

"Thank you," Draven said.

"You may spend the night," Gwynn offered. "But I'll expect you to leave tomorrow. I don't want Mobeck to have any legitimate excuse to arrest me or to confiscate my lands."

"Would he dare?"

"In a heartbeat." Gwynn snorted.

Draven and I were shown to our rooms by a pretty woman who turned out to be Gwynn's wife, Karona. She spoke little but seemed eager to make sure we were comfortable. She apologized about my bedroom, which was closet-sized, though it held a bed, an end table, and a dresser. I told her it was very nice. She said she figured I'd be hungry after such a terrible ordeal and promised that dinner would be served soon.

I noticed that the shadows were moving slowly across the floor, so I went to the window and watched with fascination as the sun disappeared into the horizon. I imagined that most of the people around the world watched it now, moving as it hadn't moved for three years.

Karona served me my meal in my room. "Gwynn thinks it'll be better if the other members of the household and staff

don't see you," she explained. "We may have spies among us."

"Thank you," I said gratefully.

She left while I ate. The food was good. It tasted like roast beef but was white like fish. I was curious if it was real or artificial.

Draven didn't join me, and I wondered what he was doing. After I finished eating, I crept into the hallway. I saw a tray full of untouched food next to his door and knocked softly.

"Draven?" I whispered, then knocked again. "Draven."

The door was unlocked from the other side and slowly opened. I put a hand to my mouth. Draven looked terrible. His hair was disheveled, as if he'd been tugging at it, and his eyes were red-rimmed from crying.

"Draven? What's wrong?"

Draven wiped his hand across his mouth. "Leave me alone," he said gruffly.

"No," I replied, taking a step into the room.

He put a hand on my shoulder to hold me back. "Don't come in. I'm busy."

"Doing what?"

"Praying," he said. "I can't be disturbed."

"You're upset about what happened with Skalaw."

He frowned at me. "You'd better believe I'm upset! And for that reason I need time alone with the Unseen One. He let me down, Scott. He brought me to this great moment and then hung me out to dry. I couldn't be more alone."

"You're not alone. I'm here," I reminded him.

A tiny smile crept across his lips. "You should go home now," he said and closed the door on me.

I knocked again. "But how?" I asked. "How am I supposed to go home?"

He didn't answer.

That night, the darkness covered us like a blanket. Owls that probably hadn't hooted for three years now exercised their vocal cords. Crickets chirped loudly. Somewhere in the distance, cows mooed and sheep bleated.

I lay in bed, worrying. What was wrong with Draven, and what was he going to do next? What did he mean by telling me to go home? Was I supposed to find my way back to that railway tunnel and hope it would lead me there?

I thought about my parents. In all the excitement, I

hadn't thought about them much that day. I wondered if they missed me. Were they worried about me? Then I hoped that coming to Marus was the same as going to Narnia, where days, months, and years might pass while only seconds passed in your own world. If it worked that way, my parents wouldn't even know I was missing. They might never know.

I tried to picture their reactions when I told them about my adventure. My father would ask a lot of questions. He'd probably try to figure out the philosophy of it all. How could someone travel to a parallel world? Why would that world be so much like ours, and yet so different? Is there a way to travel back to it again? And then he would probably go to the railway tunnel and try to get into Marus himself.

My mother would listen to me and smile patiently, never betraying whether she believed me. If it really happened, she'd think it was because God wanted it to, and for a good purpose. If it were only something I made up, she'd think it was good that I had such a vivid imagination.

Both my parents always said I would do something special when I grew up. "You have the brains and the imagination to do wonderful things for God," Mom often said. "Your father and I keep waiting for the day when He'll tell you what He wants you to do." For that reason, I grew up believing that one day God would talk to me. I prayed and always expected some kind of answer. It's how I assumed things worked.

And right now, I wished God would say something. I wished He would tell me how to get home. But for the time being, I felt I should stick close to Draven.

I got up the next morning determined to help shake Draven out of his doldrums. Maybe he needed to rest somewhere away from all the trouble. *We could escape somewhere,* I thought. *Maybe he could come to my world with me for a while*.

I slipped out of my room and went to Draven's door just as Gwynn came down the hall. "He's not there," Gwynn said.

"What?" I asked, my mouth going dry and the blood draining out of my face. "Where is he?"

Gwynn held up a piece of paper. "This was on the kitchen table when we woke up this morning. It's a note from Draven."

He handed me the paper.

In clear handwriting, it said:

Gwynn,

Thank you for the hospitality and protection. I have gone to Eastcliff to pray and meditate. Take care of the boy. He'll be no trouble to you.

Draven

I stared at the note, dumbfounded. "He left me?" I asked, not believing it.

"I'm afraid so."

"But how could he?" My eyes burned. This was wrong. It was a terrible mistake.

"It's probably for the best," Gwynn said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Mobeck and Skalaw want to kill Draven, not you. By leaving, he's put you out of danger."

"But what am I going to do?" I asked. "Where should I go?"

"He didn't say. But you're welcome to stay here for a while."

I leaned against the wall, my head swimming. Now I couldn't go home *or* follow Draven. I shoved the note into my pocket and rubbed my face.

That day crawled by at a snail's pace. I lingered around the house like a bored child, getting in people's way and feeling sorry for myself. Karona offered to play games with me, but that made me feel like a baby, so I said no thanks. Gwynn got tired of my moping and decided it was worth the risk to send me out to the orchard to collect apples with his workers. It was soon obvious that he had told the foreman of the crew to work me hard. He did, in spite of my sprained ankle. I was so busy that I didn't have time to think about how unfortunate I was.

I did the same thing the next day and the day after that. The days went by quickly, and I was so tired that I slept soundly at night. I also started to get the feeling that everything was going to be all right somehow. God—the Unseen One—was going to take care of me.

One night at supper, Gwynn announced that he was going to Hailsham for a city council meeting. "Something is

going on," I heard him tell Karona. "I got a message from three of the members telling me not to miss it. I have a feeling Mobeck and Skalaw might be trying to get our land again."

"You can't trust them," Karona reminded him anxiously. "How will I know you're all right?"

Gwynn pondered the question for a while, trying to decide how to get word back to Karona if something went wrong at the meeting. "All our servants and workers are known to Mobeck's police," he finally began. "If he tries anything treacherous with me, he's sure to have them arrested."

"What if you take somebody the police don't know?" I asked.

"Like who?"

"Me," I said. "They don't know me. I could sneak in, and if anything happens, I could run home or call phone Karona."

At first Gwynn said no. But the more he thought about it, the better the idea seemed. Finally he agreed to take me with him.

I was grateful. Not only did I want to get out of the house for a while, but I also wanted to feel like I was helping him. The plan was for me to call Karona from the public phone at the city hall.

As we drove to Hailsham in his car, Gwynn gave me a map with the directions home clearly marked. "If anything does happen—and probably nothing will—run back to the house as fast as you can after you've made the call. It's three miles by car, but you can make it quicker cutting across the country."

"Draven and I did the same thing," I told him. "The day when time restarted, we got to Mobeck's house before he did."

The city hall was just off Hailsham's main street. I waited in the car while Gwynn went in. Dozens of people also made their way up the steps and disappeared inside. Then, when the stream of traffic died down and I didn't think anyone was paying attention, I got out of the car and headed in. I looked for any sign of Mobeck, Skalaw, or their guards but didn't see them. It was evening now, and the building seemed dark and empty. I could hear voices coming from a room and saw light spilling out onto the floor at the end of the center hall.

I crept to the door and slipped into the back of a large meeting room. The council members sat at a table at the far end. The room was full of people in chairs set up to accommodate an audience. A man at the center of the table was droning on about the damage done to the water system because of Draven's "evil trickery." Another man complained about the difficulties of maintaining electricity because of what Draven had done. A woman then grumbled about the new strain on the other health and public services.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The Unseen One had restored time and allowed life to return to its natural state, and these politicians were griping about it!

Gwynn looked bored. At one point he glanced up at me, rolled his eyes, and looked away again.

Finally the chairman at the center—at least, I assumed he was the chairman—asked if anyone present had other items to bring to the council's attention.

Suddenly one of the audience members stood up. "I have a grievance against Gwynn," the man said in a thick voice. It was Tesdor!

Gwynn sat up straight.

"What's your grievance?" the chairman asked.

"I have evidence that Gwynn has been in cahoots with an enemy of the state."

"Nonsense!" Gwynn said.

Tesdor held up a large folder. "I have photos in here of Gwynn conspiring with Draven himself no less than *three hours* after Draven's plot against our supreme commander and his wife failed."

His plot failed? I wondered, open-mouthed. *But time was restored!* I wanted to shout.

Gwynn seemed unconcerned. "Go back and tell your bosses it won't work," he said to Tesdor. "Everyone here knows that the supreme commander and Lady Skalaw will do anything to get my land. But this council is wise to their ways and won't fall for your tricks."

Another man I hadn't seen before stood up. "Is that so?" he challenged. "Then the council is willing to ignore photos *and* testimony that will prove you are a co-conspirator with Draven?"

"Show your photos!" Gwynn dared him. "Bring out your testimony!"

A projector was brought in, a screen set up, and the lights dimmed. Blurred photos were splashed onto the screen of Gwynn talking to someone. It might have been Draven, or it might have been someone else. The photos weren't clear enough to prove either case.

"That might easily be one of my workers," Gwynn said.

"Ah," replied the mystery man, "but our testimony will confirm that it was Draven himself."

"Testimony from whom?" Gwynn asked.

The lights came up again and a thin, weaselly-looking man stood up, his hat in his hand. "I saw you talking to Draven," the man declared in a high voice.

Gwynn looked closely at the man. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm a man in your employ."

Gwynn looked closer, then smiled. "You're a man who *was* in my employ. I fired you last week for trying to steal from me. You couldn't have seen me talking to Draven—or *anyone*—this week."

"But I saw you!" the man shouted, his voice squeaking. "You and Draven are old friends!"

Gwynn leaned back in his chair. "This is ridiculous," he growled. "I beg the council to clear the room of these hacks."

The council members all looked away from Gwynn, their eyes fixed on other things. No one moved. The chairman didn't say anything.

"Well?" Gwynn asked. "Can we get on with our meeting or not?"

Still no one spoke.

"Then *I'll* do it." Gwynn pointed at his accusers. "As a fully endowed member of this council, I demand that you leave this meeting immediately. We won't tolerate thieves and liars, no matter who they work for!"

"Liars!" Tesdor exclaimed as he leaped to his feet. His chair fell back with a crash.

It was clear to me later that this was a cue. As soon as Tesdor got up, people began to shout and shove each other. More chairs were knocked over, and it looked as if a riot had started, but there was something fake about it. For all the pushing and yelling, no one seemed to get hurt.

Someone brushed past me then, almost knocking me over. It was a man in a black-and-red uniform. Then came

another and another. The first man blew a shrill whistle and shouted, “Break it up! You’re under arrest!”

More confusion followed as the council members and people in the audience shouted their protests. Then, in the thick of it, fingers were pointed at Gwynn as if *he’d* started the trouble. Tesdor and his cronies reiterated their claim that Gwynn was a traitor who had helped Draven. They waved their blurred photos and got the thin man to say again what he’d supposedly seen.

That seemed like enough evidence for the head of the police, who now threw in the charge that Gwynn had come to the meeting to incite a riot. Two officers grabbed Gwynn and started to drag him out. The council members again stayed in their seats without saying a word in Gwynn’s defense.

“This is a setup!” Gwynn cried out. Then he shouted at the council members, “How much did they pay you?”

I tried to get out before the rest of the crowd and rushed down the hallway to the front door and the nearby public phone box. More police were milling around, waiting, and a crowd gathered. I heard a commotion back down the hall. I turned in time to see that a scuffle had broken out in the crowd surrounding Gwynn. It was too dark to see who was doing what. Then a shot rang out. A woman screamed.

One of the policemen charged up the stairs and knocked me aside. “What happened?” he called out.

“Gwynn’s been shot!” someone answered. “He was trying to escape!”

I felt sick in my stomach, and I knew what had really happened.

“Stop that boy!” Tesdor shouted from behind me.

I bolted for the door. There was no chance to make a call now. I had to get to Karona to warn her. I ran outside to the porch and, as I descended the steps, yelled at the policemen, “Someone’s been shot! The assassin is trying to escape!”

The police ran up the stairs, just in time to collide with Tesdor and his men as they came out the door. I sprinted down an alley that led to a field behind the village. This was the way back, I knew.

I ran as fast as I could across the dark fields, following the paths Gwynn had told me about. Only once did I have to stop to look at the map, using the light of the two full moons

to see.

As I got closer to Gwynn's estate, I saw a strange orange and red glow in the sky. I thought it was some other freak of nature—another miracle of Draven's—until I realized what it was. Gwynn's house was on fire. I reached the front gate and found two policemen posted there.

"You can't go in there," one of them told me.

"What happened?" I asked, a sick feeling rising in my throat.

"A terrible accident. No survivors," he replied. "Now go home."

I heard sirens coming—or it might have been a high-pitched scream of panic in my brain. I turned and let the tears fall as I ran into the darkness.



Since I didn't know where to go after getting clear of Gwynn's property, I walked aimlessly for what seemed like miles and miles. Eventually, I found a barn in the middle of a field. It was covered and had plenty of hay in it, so I hid myself and prayed that the Unseen One would help me figure out what to do in the morning. I fell asleep.

I had a vivid dream about my parents. They were sitting by a fire in a cave. My father was in his favorite easy chair, reading a book. My mother was doing the crossword puzzle in the newspaper. Then suddenly my mother looked up at me and said, "We always knew you would do something special for God. He gave you to us when we thought we'd never have a child. But we must give you back to Him. Go to Eastcliff."

"But I don't know where it is," I complained.

My father looked over his glasses at me impatiently. "Use your head, son," he instructed.

Voices woke me the next morning. I sat up, then scrambled farther into the hay to keep from getting in trouble.

"You don't have to hide," a woman said. "We've already seen you. We were going to let you sleep longer." I peeked out of the stack of hay. A pleasant-looking, heavyset woman was leaning down toward me, wiggling a finger. "Come on out."

I crawled out into full view. The woman was there with a man, who was also pleasant-looking and heavyset.

"Thank you," I said as I dusted myself off. "I was lost and tired and—"

"You don't have to explain," the man said. "In these difficult days, we often find people in our barn."

The woman nodded. "Yes, we've become an unofficial crossing point on the border. Fugitives, politicians, refugees—they all come through here."

"Border?" I asked, puzzled. "What border?"

"The border between East and West Marus," the woman said.

I was crestfallen. "You mean I walked to the other country without meaning to?"

The man shoved a pitchfork into the hay, as if to remove any hint that I'd been in it. "Whether you meant to or not, you did. You are now in East Marus."

"Aren't you happy to be away from that wicked tyrant and his wife?" the woman asked.

"I'm happy to be away from them, I guess. But not if it's put me farther away from Eastcliff."

"Farther away?" The man looked at the woman, and they both laughed. "Where do you think Eastcliff is?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"Use your head," the woman playfully scolded me. "Where do you think *East*cliff might be?"

"In East Marus?" I guessed.

They both applauded my intelligence. Then the woman said, "Come inside. We can give you a nice breakfast now that the chickens are laying eggs again. Then we'll show you where Eastcliff is."

The man's name was Londor, and the woman's name was Idyll. As best as I could make out from their conversation, they were a "stop" on a sort of Underground Railroad from West to East Marus. People who needed to escape Mobeck and Skalaw came through this part of the country since it didn't have many proper roads and wasn't as heavily guarded. And only when Londor pulled out a map of Marus did I see that Hailsham was just a few miles from the East Marus border. I had stumbled onto it by accident—or with the help of the Unseen One.

To my surprise, Marus was all shoreline on the east, where it met the Alconian Sea. Eastcliff was a small village on the northern shore. I was disheartened to learn that it would take several days of hard walking to get there. It occurred to me, too, that Draven might not be there when I arrived.

I looked at the map again and saw that Raundale was in the northern territory of West Marus. Maybe if I went there, I could find the railway tunnel and go back to my own world again? Maybe. But it was also possible that the railway tunnel was one-way into Marus and not a way out. Only the Unseen

One, or maybe Draven, could get me home.

So with a full stomach, a packed lunch, and a heavy heart, I left Londor and Idyll. I headed north on Albany Road and wished I had my driver's license or, at the very least, a bike.

After a few miles, I came to a sign indicating that a railway station was nearby. If I went just north of the station, I reasoned, I might be able to catch a train as it left the station, before it picked up speed, and jump into an open car as I had done with Draven.

The idea seemed like a good one, and the station wasn't much more than a shack with a ticket office. I followed the tracks a little way up from the station and waited behind a tree.

After about an hour, a train pulled in from the south, let its passengers off, then came my way. I tried to gauge its speed and raced alongside, hoping it had an open car. One came by. I ran harder and was barely able to grab onto a ladder bolted to the side. Remembering to keep my legs clear of the wheels and tracks, I pulled up with all my might, swinging myself into the car. I collapsed onto the floor to catch my breath.

"And what do we have here?" a voice said.

I looked up. A toothless old man with scuzzy, white whiskers leaned over me.

"Hi," I said with a gasp.

"Hi, yourself. Have you got fare for my car?" the old man asked.

I sat up. The car was empty except for the dirt and straw on its floor. We were alone. "Fare?" I asked.

"You'd better have something for me, or I'll throw you off."

I glanced out the open door. The train was picking up speed. To jump off now would do me a lot of damage. "What kind of fare?" I inquired.

The old man looked at my packed lunch. "What's in there?" he asked.

"Lunch."

He snatched the bag away from me with a speed I wouldn't have thought possible. "That'll do." He retreated to the rear of the car and tore into my bag.

I sat at the other end of the car and watched him eat my

lunch. I tried to be friendly and asked him questions, but he talked like a broken record about a garden he once had and how many potatoes he grew on it. “Half a ton!” he said.

Apart from that, we sat in silence.

The journey was long, hard on my rear end, and boring. I didn’t dare go to sleep for fear that the old man might try to steal something else from me, like my shoes. We stopped at various stations along the way, but no one bothered with our car. It started to rain, and the old man moved to my end of the car because the rain was blowing back onto him. He jabbered again about the garden he once had and how many potatoes he grew on it. “A ton!” he boasted.

It was getting late in the afternoon, and I started to feel my hunger. The old man’s talk of potatoes didn’t help.

As night approached, I started to wonder how far north we’d gone. I didn’t want to go too far, or I’d miss Eastcliff and have to double back. I thought about asking the old man but wasn’t confident he’d give me the right answer. I decided to take a chance and get off before we reached the next station.

An hour later, the train started to slow down. Peeking out the door, I saw a large city up ahead. When it seemed safe, I said good-bye to the old man, who had fallen asleep, and jumped off. I then walked along the tracks up to the station itself.

In the station I found a wall map. I was in a town called Fangettal. With relief, I saw that I was due west of Eastcliff. On the map, it didn’t look like a very long walk at all.

Not far from the station, I found an abandoned shed. It might have been used by railway workers at one time, but it looked as if it could shelter me from the rain. It would do until morning. I curled up for a good night’s sleep.

The rain continued all night and started to leak through the roof. No matter where I moved in the shed, I either got hit by the slow drips or splashed by them after they hit the floor. At dawn, the rain stopped, and I gave up trying to sleep anymore. I came out of the shed and was stopped cold by a shock. To the east, the direction I had to go, lay a vast, open country—and mountains. They were large, rounded mountains, the kind that stand out like the shoulders on a hunched-over man.

“Oh no!” I moaned. Eastcliff was somewhere on the other side of those mountains. With a deep groan, I started the

difficult journey.

At first the going was easy. I walked across green meadows and through groves of trees. I took a chance and ate some wild berries from a patch of bushes. They tasted good and didn't seem to hurt me. I stopped by a gurgling stream and drank the freshest water I'd ever had. Then the incline began and the hills grew bigger. Their sides were splashed with the yellows, reds, and purples of wildflowers. Soon thereafter, I headed into a thick forest. My breathing became heavier as no clear path presented itself. I made my way over fallen trees, around thick patches of bushes, and through damp leaves. I could smell the wet and the wood all around. Birds teased me. Somewhere in the distance, I heard a growl. Did they have bears in this country? I didn't know and certainly didn't want to think about it.

I came upon another stream that seemed to cut through the forest and up into the mountain and decided to follow it. If worse came to worst, I wouldn't be thirsty, I figured.

The stream meandered up the mountainside and, hours later, got me near the top before it seemed to disappear into a thicket. I went on without it, and when I thought I was at the very top, I turned, hoping for a view of where I'd been. Unfortunately, the trees were too high and the woods were too thick. The same was true for the direction in which I was headed. Every muscle in my body ached now. I considered stopping for a while but concluded it would be a waste of daylight. I pressed onward down the other side of the mountain.

More than once, I wondered where all this was going to lead me. I might find Draven in Eastcliff, but he might not want to see me. He had deserted me, after all. And it was possible that he didn't know how to get me home again. Then where would I be?

I had more berries for dinner and wished I had been a Boy Scout or something useful. I was probably surrounded by wonderfully edible things and didn't know it.

It started to get dark, and I thought about where I would sleep. After searching for a while, I found a large wreck of a tree that had fallen over in such a way as to provide shelter beneath it. I collected loose branches and made a tent around the section of the tree where I hoped to sleep. The ground underneath was only slightly damp. I prayed that the

Unseen One would protect me from bears, snakes, and anything else that might mistake me for a meal. For a long time, every sound from the woods—and the growling of my own nearly empty stomach—kept me awake. I dozed.

Tired and stiff, I got up the next morning and felt a bad mood fall over me like a cloudburst. I trudged down the mountain, grumbling the whole way. *What if I reach the bottom, and there's another mountain to go over? And another after that? What if there are a* dozen *mountains to cross to get to Eastcliff? What if Draven isn't there? Why can't the Unseen One make this easier for me? After all, it wasn't my idea to come to Marus. I didn't ask to witness everything that had happened*.

As if to confirm my darkest worries, the woods thinned out and I came to a clearing that gave me a view of what lay ahead. Another mountain stood before me, this one even higher than the one I'd just crossed. I slumped down where I was, exhausted and discouraged, and felt like having a good cry. And I might have, but then I saw a ribbon of black cutting up into the mountain. I followed it down to the valley below with my eye and realized that it crossed somewhere directly in front of me.

A road!

And if there was a road, there might be a car or a truck driven by someone who'd give me a ride.

Hopeful, I got up and walked on with a purposeful spring in my step. Two hours later, I reached the road. It was old and potholed. Did anyone ever use it? I looked in both directions. No one was in sight. Should I follow it in the hopes that someone might come along, or was it smarter to carry on straight up the mountain?

Help me, I asked the Unseen One. *Which is the best way to go?*

The answer came in a tiny sliver of smoke that drifted from amidst the trees, just around a bend in the road toward the north. "Where there's smoke, there's fire," I muttered to myself and headed in that direction.

The distance was deceptive. It took half an hour to get to the bend. The smoke came from the chimney of a small cottage. Next to it was an old-fashioned diner called the One-Stop Café. I had no money for food, but I thought I could at least ask how far it was to Eastcliff. I tried the door handle, but it was locked. A sign handwritten in a terrible scrawl said,

“Ring the bell,” so I did.

“Coming, coming!” a man shouted from the cottage and came hustling over to me, tying an apron around his waist. When he realized I was only a kid, he slowed down. “It’s the slack time of year,” he said. “I only open the café if someone comes.”

“I don’t have any money for food,” I explained.

He stopped where he was. He was a middle-aged man with short black hair and a wiry mustache. “I’m not a charity,” he said gruffly.

“I just wanted to ask how far it is to Eastcliff.”

“Once you get over the mountain, it’s about 30 miles. Maybe 40. Might be 50, come to think of it.”

“Oh,” I said. “Thanks.”

The man looked as if he might turn around and go back to the cottage, but he couldn’t resist asking, “What are you doing way out here? We don’t get many people unless they’re in some kind of car or truck. Did you walk?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Are you a runaway?”

“No, sir. I was left behind by accident, and now I’m going to Eastcliff to meet someone.”

The man cocked an eyebrow. “Left behind *where* by accident?”

“Hailsham or Deptford—I’m not sure.”

“They’re close to each other. And you’ve come all this way? Well, that sounds even stranger. Good luck.” He now turned to go.

“Sir,” I began, not sure of what I wanted to say. “I was wondering if there was any chance of working for some food. I don’t need much. Just a sandwich or something.”

The man considered the idea. “Okay. I’d like to get some wood chopped before winter. Come inside and eat. Then I’ll show you what I need done.”

We went into the diner. It was all chrome, with a long counter and red-topped stools on one side and booths on the other. The man went behind the counter to the grill. He pointed to a bright-red menu and asked, “What are you hungry for? We’ve got a full menu again, what with the resumption of time.”

Everything on the menu made me so hungry that my stomach ached. I chose a lunch special that included

something that looked like an oversized hamburger, cut potatoes (like french fries), and a drink.

The man threw the burger on the grill and turned on a small black-and-white television while he cooked it. The sound was down, but the news report showed clips from what had happened at the University of Hailsham. I saw Mobeck and his various advisers, Skalaw and her dancing priests, and, of course, Draven. The film showed him with his eyes closed and hands held in the air, and then the camera cut to the large clock as the hands spun wildly. The picture suddenly broke up.

"Boy, that was something," the man said, waving a spatula at the television.

"I know," I said. "I was there."

The man spun on his heel to face me. "You're pulling my leg."

"No, sir. I was in the front row when it happened."

He eyed me carefully. "I don't take well to liars."

"I'm not lying! I was there with Draven, and then we—"

"You were *with* Draven?" the man asked, dumbfounded.

"That's who I'm supposed to meet in Eastcliff."

The man still looked at me with a mixture of suspicion and awe. He obviously didn't know whether to believe me. "Prove it," he finally said.

I tried to think of a way but didn't know how.

"Prove it, and you'll get your meal for free," he continued. "I'll even throw in dinner. In fact, you can stay in my guest room." He leaned on his elbows and tipped his head my way, as if telling me a secret. "I'm a believer, you know. In the Unseen One."

I shook my head. "I don't know how to prove it to you. I was there with him, I saw everything that happened, but I don't have anything to prove it."

"That's too bad," the man said. Then he thought of something. "I have a picture of Draven. He even autographed it for me a few years ago, right before time stopped."

The man reached under the counter and pulled out a framed photo of Draven. It was the same photo I'd seen in the magazine. *It doesn't look much like him now,* I thought. At the bottom, in Draven's handwriting, it said, "Keep the faith. Draven."

"Wait a minute," I said and slid off the stool. "I have

proof!" I rifled through my pockets and pulled out the note Draven had written back at Gwynn's house. I handed it to the man. "Draven wrote this. I'm the boy he referred to. You can compare the handwriting if you want proof."

The man looked at the note and then the photo. He clucked his tongue thoughtfully. "Well, there you are," he said happily. Holding out his hand to me, he said, "I'm Byngriff."

I shook his hand. "My name is Scott."

The smell of the hamburger on the grill filled the diner. Things were looking up.



"I can take you as far as the downs," Byngriff said over breakfast the next morning.

"What are the downs?" I asked.

Byngriff looked at me, surprised. "The *downs*."

I shrugged.

"Downs are—" He stopped himself and frowned. "Oh, everyone knows what the downs are."

"I don't."

"The downs are . . . they're the open countryside, the rolling green land. Sometimes they have trees. They're mostly used as pasture. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," I replied. I figured I would recognize them when I saw them.

"Eat up. We have to go," he said.

Since Byngriff had realized that I was somehow connected to Draven, he had treated me like royalty. I had eaten a hearty lunch and a full dinner and slept in a warm, dry bed. Byngriff had insisted it was all a pleasure for him, but I insisted on chopping some wood to help pay him back. He reluctantly let me do it, but I noticed he gave me the smallest logs to do.

"Once we get over the next mountain and head toward the sea, we'll come to the downs," Byngriff explained. "You can't miss them. Eastcliff is on the other end. I'd drive you all the way, but it's a winding road, and I can't be away from my diner that long. People tend to break in and help themselves to my food when I'm not here."

"I don't want to take you out of your way," I said. But I was secretly grateful not to have to go over the mountain on foot.

"My pleasure. And who knows? Maybe we'll bump into

Draven along the way, and I can say hello again."

I hoped Byngriff's wish would come true.

The road over the mountain and down the other side was full of tortuous curves. The crossing took nearly two hours in Byngriff's old pickup truck. At one point along the way, I had a view of the scene below. I could see how the downs spilled one hill over another, like rippling green waves, toward the blue sea beyond.

At the bottom of the mountain, Byngriff pulled off the road and let me out. "Thank you for everything," I said warmly, shaking his hand.

He smiled, then pointed to the east. The view was exactly as he had described: open and rolling fields of green. "Straight across those downs is where you'll find Eastcliff," he said. "I hope the Unseen One will guide you."

"Me, too."

I closed the door and stepped away as he circled the truck around and headed back for his home. With a false sense of confidence, I made my way into the downs. *I'm nearly there,* I thought. *It should be easy now*.

But it wasn't. Halfway across the downs, which were bigger than they had looked from a distance, it began to rain. I eventually reached a small village that bore the name of Eastcliff. It had an inn, a combination post office and grocery store, and a handful of cottages scattered off a single dirt road. The woman at the post office said that she'd seen Draven several days before, but not since. When I asked if he might be staying at the inn, she replied, "I doubt it. He never does when he comes here."

"Does he stay in one of the cottages?" I suggested.

"Not that I know of." She scratched at her chin. "Come to think of it, I don't know where he stays when he comes here. I don't think anybody knows. We reckoned it was none of our business."

"Then how am I supposed to find him?"

The woman squinted as if looking for an idea. "I guess you'll have to go house to house. If he's still in the area, someone's bound to have seen him. Other than that, you'll have to hike up and down the coast. Maybe you'll happen upon him that way."

I looked out at the falling rain. Neither idea seemed good to me, but I didn't have a choice.

From cottage to cottage I went, asking the same question: “Have you seen Draven?” Most of the people I met were friendly—a couple of them even gave me brief shelter from the rain, cups of tea, and cookies—but they didn’t know where Draven was. Others were more suspicious and gave me the impression that even if they’d seen him, they wouldn’t tell me.

Finally, after the rain had stopped late in the afternoon, I met an old man walking a dog. He was obviously hard of hearing and shouted in response to my question, “Ravens? No, not around this time of year!”

“*Draven*,” I corrected him. “A tall man, looks like a movie star.”

“A moving *what?”*

I groaned and spoke loudly and slowly. “He’s a *voice* for the *Unseen One*.”

The man looked at me as if he was trying to work out in his mind what I’d just said. Then he nodded briskly and shouted, “Oh yes, Draven! I see him from time to time, walking on the beach! Doesn’t talk much! Just a nod and a hello!”

“When did you last see him?” I asked hopefully.

“It might have been yesterday! Or last week!” He tipped up his cap and scratched his head. “Or am I confusing that with last year? You know, I got awfully confused when the sun got stuck!”

“Do you know where he lives when he comes here?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” the old man yelled with a frown. “He doesn’t give me anything! We say hello, that’s all!”

“*Lives*,” I said louder. “Do you know where he *lives*.”

“Never noticed!” the old man replied. “Good day!” He whistled for his dog, who’d wandered off to more-interesting places, and strolled away.

So my only clue was that Draven sometimes walked along the beach. I shrugged to no one and ventured that way, trekking straight across the windswept downs to the sea beyond. Before long, I discovered what no one had told me—namely, that the downs came to a very *high* dead end at the shore. A sheer white cliff dropped down to the beach and the water hundreds of feet below. Just offshore was a red-and-white-striped lighthouse. I was amazed. I never thought I’d be in a position to look *down* on a lighthouse.

"I guess this is why they call it East*cliff*," I said to myself.

I paced up and down the edge, peering over where I could, in hopes of seeing a way down. I couldn't find anything. I looked to the north and then the south. Miles away, in either direction, it looked as if the land sloped to meet the sea. But I didn't want to walk that far just to walk all the way back again. There had to be a way down.

I slowly walked north, watching the edge for any sign of a break or a path. I had several false alarms and nearly slipped over the side once but found nothing. Finally, just as the sun began to sink, I saw what looked like a grassy path angling downward. I went up to it carefully, testing my footing along the way, and peered over. The path seemed to lead down to a ragged cliff. From there, it looked as though the rocky terrain sloped more gently to the beach. *This must be the way*, I thought and stepped more bravely.

After going only a few dozen feet down the path, I realized the ragged cliff was higher above the rocky terrain than I'd thought. A gap of 30 or 40 feet existed between the cliff and the start of the rocks below. I'd never be able to bridge that without a rope, I knew. Discouraged, I turned to go back up to the top.

The return should have been easy. But it had started to rain again, making the grass slick. I found myself slipping a lot. My heart pounded one time as I slid near the very edge, catching sight of the waves and rocks far below before I skidded to a stop. I got on all fours and started again.

Near the top of the path, I sighed with relief and stood up straight—and instantly lost my footing again. I screamed as I slid downward, coming close to the edge of the path. Down and down I went until, with a bump against a large rock, I stopped at the lower cliff's border. A seagull gave me an indignant look, shook its feathers, and took off. I slowly stood up. My back and legs hurt, but I was all right.

The rain fell more heavily now. I looked at the path and knew I'd never get back up while it was so wet. But I didn't much like the idea of being stuck on this cliff, either. I glanced around. The beach, waves, and rocks were still a long way down. Then something caught my eye, and I quickly turned around. There was a cave in the cliff face.

If I'd thought about it, I might have been too afraid to

go straight in. But the rain was pouring down, and I was already soaked to the skin, so in I went. The cave was dry at least. I felt around in the dark, praying that I wouldn't put my hand in anything disgusting. My fingers brushed against something furry, and I dashed out onto the path again. I watched the cave, expecting a bear or something equally horrible to come out after me. It didn't. Not a sound or a movement came from within.

I couldn't stay in the rain, I knew, so I ventured back into the cave, thoughts of something hairy and dead filling my head. I reached out again to the fur. Whatever it had been in life, it was dead enough now—dead and skinned, in fact. My elbow bumped something that felt like a wooden crate. I heard a rattle of glass and metal. I felt around on the top of the crate and found matches. I hoped they were dry enough to light. After one or two false sparks, a flame came to life, giving me a dim view of my surroundings.

The first thing I saw was an oil lamp. That was the rattle of glass and metal I'd heard. There was oil left in the base. I took off the glass top and lit the wick. It spat at me and then slowly burned blue, then yellow and red.

The cave had been a home to someone. Several large furs lay on the floor. I assumed it was a makeshift bed. To my eye, it looked comfortable enough to sleep in. Empty cardboard boxes were scattered around. Even a pair of old-fashioned eyeglasses sat nearby.

A pirate's den, I thought and imagined buried treasure somewhere deep in the cave. But it wasn't that deep—only a dozen feet beyond where I now sat. Whoever had furnished this cave had also piled some dead brush to the side. I could see the black stain where a fire had been made. I followed suit. Using the cardboard boxes as kindling, I got a fire going. The natural draft of the cave sent the smoke outside.

"Thank You," I said aloud to the Unseen One as the heat dried my wet clothes.

Night came, the rain stopped, and the clouds cleared the way for Marus's two moons to come out. They reflected brightly on the water, and for a while I felt cozy and contented. I went to the edge of the cliff and looked over. I never would have survived that fall. *Something else to be thankful for,* I thought.

A yellow glow farther up the beach caught my eye. It

was a fire. Someone was down there, moving back and forth in front of the flames. I got the impression he was pacing. Could it be Draven? I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted at the top of my lungs, “Draven!”

The pacing continued. Whoever it was probably couldn’t hear me because of the waves. I shouted a couple more times, but nothing happened. I kept watching. What was he doing down there? He paced for another minute, and then it looked as though he sat down by the fire. Or was he kneeling? I squinted, trying to see more clearly. He was definitely kneeling, and his arms were raised to the sky. It reminded me of how he had looked when time was restored.

Then a strange thing happened. Out of the clear night sky, another storm came. Thunder rolled, lightning flashed, and rain blew in on a gale—all without clouds. I retreated into the cave and watched it all, bewildered. The two moons were still there in a clear sky, but the storm raged on.

“What in the world is going on here?” I asked out loud.

Then, just as suddenly as it had come, the storm stopped. I crept out onto the cliff again and looked down at the man on the beach. The fire still blazed, and he stayed on his knees with his arms held up.

Am I dreaming? I wondered. Surely a storm like that would have put out the fire and driven the man to safety. But there he remained, as if nothing had happened.

I watched him for another moment. He didn’t move from his position. The night seemed quiet and calm. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something move on the sea. I thought it might have been a large ship or maybe even a giant sea creature, but it wasn’t. The sea itself seemed to rise up, slowly at first, like a hill growing on the horizon. Higher and higher it went until the two moons were blocked from my view.

Though I’d never seen one before, I knew what it was. “A tidal wave,” I gasped, and it was headed straight for us!

“Draven!” I shouted again and again. But the man below didn’t move. He didn’t seem to notice what was coming at him from the sea.

The water climbed even higher, and I backed away into the cave. My mouth went dry and my legs felt spindly. Could that wave reach as high as my cave? If it could, there was no hope for either of us. I went as far back into the cave as I

could, and pressed against the cold stone wall. I watched the wave come, roaring now like a ferocious grizzly, getting bigger and bigger until it was all I could see from the mouth of the cave.

"Help me!" I whispered to the Unseen One.

The enormous wave came down with a wild, churning, bubbling fury.



I pushed and kicked against the wave with all my might. The furs that had covered me were thrown aside.

The flickering light from my fire bounced on the walls. All was quiet. All was dry. The two moons hung higher than they had been before. There was no sign of a storm or a wave.

"A dream?" I gasped, still feeling the effects of it on my nerves. "It was a dream?"

I climbed to my feet and went out to the cliff. *It wasn't entirely a dream,* I thought. The fire still burned on the beach, and the kneeling man still held his hands up in the air. I slumped onto the ground. "Unless *this* is a dream too," I said. I thought about it for a moment. *Could I be having a dream—or a dream within a dream—when I think I'm wide awake?*

I pinched myself. "Ouch," I whispered and rubbed the small red welt I'd made.

"What's going on here?" I asked out loud, looking up. The Unseen One could hear me without my speaking out loud, but it felt better to hear my own voice. "Please tell me what this means."

I looked down at the man on the beach. He was no longer holding his hands up but had fallen facedown into the sand. I had no doubt it was Draven. And then I had a sudden and reassuring feeling that whatever had happened wasn't really for me at all. It had happened for *him*. Like all the other supernatural things I'd seen, I had seen them as they'd happened to Draven.

So once again I was his witness. That's what he had called me back at the start, a witness.

"Is that why I'm here?" I asked the Unseen One. "Did You want me to see these things so I could tell somebody about them?" I felt a surge of excitement go through me.

Maybe the Unseen One wanted me to go back to my parents and tell them all that I'd seen here in Marus! "Is that what You want me to do?"

"Wait."

Startled, I looked around. Was somebody talking to me?

"Wait." It was a soft whisper that came from nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

I looked down at the man on the beach. He was sitting up now, looking around as if he were hearing the same thing as me.

"Wait."

"Is that You, Unseen One?" I asked. "Are You talking to me?"

"Waaay—aay—aay—"

The sound had direction now. It came from the path. I turned to look, curious and fearful about what I might see. A small lamb stumbled into the light.

I watched it suspiciously. Was it real? Did I mistake its bleating for the voice of the Unseen One? It gamboled toward me, stopped, looked me over, then sniffed its way into the cave. I followed it, still unsure whether it was real.

It stood next to the fire and bleated at me again.

I reached out and touched it. Its coat felt real and woolly and was a little damp from having been outside.

"Are you lost?" I asked the lamb.

It bleated in reply.

"You'd better stick with me," I told it. "You'll slip if you try to go back up the path, or you might fall off the cliff. Stay here where it's warm."

The lamb seemed to get my message. It went over to my furry bed and lay down next to it. I went back out to the cliff, where the night was perfectly still. I looked at the beach; Draven had gone. The fire was fading to a dull red glow. I went back into the cave and crawled under the furs. The lamb sniffed at me, bleated one more time, then lowered its head and went to sleep.

A barking dog woke me the next morning. I lifted my head and rubbed my eyes. The lamb was also sitting up, its ears twitching at the sound.

Then came a voice. "Forma!" it called out.

The lamb stood up. So did I. Together we walked out onto the cliff and looked up the path. It was clear, but the dog

was above, barking over the grassy edge. Then the face of a young man appeared.

He waved. “Hello!” he said.

“Hi,” I replied, waving back.

“I think that’s mine,” he said, pointing at the lamb.

“I think you’re right,” I agreed. “I kept him in the cave with me through the night so he wouldn’t get hurt.”

“Thank you,” the young man said gratefully. “He got separated from the rest of the flock. He often does. It seems like I’m always chasing him.” He then called, “Come here, Forma, you naughty boy.”

Forma stayed with me.

The young man put his hands on his hips. “Forma!”

The lamb didn’t move.

“That’s strange. He usually comes to me right away.”

“I’ll bring him up,” I said and patted my leg at the lamb. “Come on, Forma.”

I made my way up the path, with Forma following happily behind.

The young man was waiting at the top. The dog ran up to sniff my trousers and hands. “You have a way with sheep,” the man observed. “Are you a shepherd?”

“Who, me? No, I’m not,” I replied. “But he seems friendly.”

“I’m Watern, a shepherd for Legginth.”

“Legginth?”

“He owns most of the land north of here.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Watern looked down the path. “I’ve been around here for years and never saw that path before. And you said there’s a cave down there?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Mind if I have a look?”

“It’s not my cave,” I explained. “I just stayed there last night because I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

Watern went down the path and then returned a minute later. He looked at me with a strange expression on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“There’s no cave down there.”

I laughed. “Yes, there is.”

But he was deadly earnest. “I promise, there’s no cave.”

Sure that he was pulling my leg, I went back down the

path. The cliff seemed much smaller than it had before—dangerously small, in fact. I couldn't have walked around it as I had last night. I turned to the cave and found myself face-to-face with a wall of rock.

"I don't believe it!" I exclaimed, pushing at the hard wall. "This is impossible!" I raced back up the path, stumbling as I went. "It was there!" I panted.

Watern spread his arms. "It's not there now."

At the top of the path, I tripped, and Watern reached out to catch me. He gazed into my face, and we made full eye contact for the first time. "I understand now," he said simply.

"What do you understand?" I asked, getting more confused by the second.

He whistled for the dog, who was playfully chasing Forma around the field.

"What do you understand?" I asked again.

"Come home with me. Legginth will want to meet you." He strode off, with the dog joining him.

I followed along, wondering what I'd gotten myself into now. Forma ran up to my side and stayed close by like a friend.

The downs spilled into Legginth's private estate. The fields were fenced off and full of grazing cows and sheep. Legginth lived in a wide, one-story house that looked as if it had started off as a simple cottage and been added to over the years. Watern ducked inside, then came back a moment later with a short, rugged-faced man with long dark hair and a matching beard.

"So you saved our Forma from disaster?" he called to me, his hand outstretched to be shaken.

I obliged. "I'm not sure," I said. "Forma might have saved *me*." Forma bumped against my leg as if he wanted my attention.

"He likes you," the man observed with a smile.

"I probably smell like a sheep," I joked.

The man was searching my face with his eyes. "Watern tells me you slept in a cave that mysteriously disappeared."

I nodded. "I can't figure it out." I wished he would quit looking at me like that.

"I might be of help," the man said. "My name is Legginth. I have taught your kind."

"My kind?"

“The chosen servants of the Unseen One.”

“What do you mean? Why do you think I’m—”

Legginth laughed. “Come inside,” he said and took my arm as if to guide me. The door we went through led to a kitchen. I could smell breakfast on the stove. A woman appeared from another door with eggs in her hand.

“Hello,” she said and went to the stove. “I’m Minter.”

“Hi. I’m Scott.”

But that was as much as I got to say. Legginth continued to lead me through the kitchen, down a long paneled hall, and straight into a bathroom.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. I felt as if I’d been dragged to the principal’s office.

On the wall was a mirror. He pointed at it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, looking at my reflection. I hadn’t seen my face in a while and was surprised. I looked older. My hair had grown wild. But that wasn’t what Legginth wanted me to see.

He pushed me closer. “Your eyes.”

I looked—and then looked again. My eyes, which had always been brown, were now two different colors. One was green, and the other was blue. I stared at myself from this angle and then that angle. My mouth hung open in disbelief.

“What does it mean?” I wondered aloud.

Legginth tugged at my sleeve. “Come have breakfast. I want you to tell me your story.”

And so, over eggs, bacon, toast, tomatoes, baked beans, and sausage, I told him everything that had happened to me. He and Minter, who turned out to be his wife, listened attentively and interrupted only to ask clarifying questions. I finished by saying, “So now I’m trying to find Draven.”

Legginth leaned back, his fingers drumming lightly on the table. “You won’t find him,” he said confidently.

My heart sank. “I won’t?” I protested. “But how will I __”

He held up a hand to stop me. “You won’t find him. He will find *you*.”

“How do you know that?”

Legginth and Minter exchanged glances. “You’ll have to trust me. I know. You won’t meet again until the Unseen One wants you to meet.”

“What am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

Legginth stopped drumming his fingers. “You can stay here. If the rest of the sheep like you as much as Forma does, you can be one of my shepherds. Watern can teach you. And there are things I can teach you as well. Consider this your time of apprenticeship.”

“Apprenticeship for what?” I asked.

Legginth smiled. “We’ll discover that eventually, too.”

Minter prepared a small room for me at the end of a ranch house, where Watern and the rest of Legginth’s workers lived. The room had a narrow bed, a dresser, and a washbasin. Then Watern introduced me to the rest of the workers. They were cordial enough. I was grateful that they didn’t stare at my eyes. Watern must have warned them.

In a routine we would follow for the next few days, Watern took me out with him to shepherd the flocks. He taught me about their behavior, their habits, and the calls to use to make them do what I wanted. I learned that they were, for the most part, incredibly stupid animals. But they were gentle and affectionate to me. “They know a good shepherd when they see one,” Watern said. He also drilled me on what to do if wolves, stray dogs, or bears attacked.

After a week, Watern made me take the sheep out by myself for the day. The following week, I led them to more-distant fields, where I actually spent the night with them under the open sky. And so it went for more than a month.

It was hard work, but I didn’t mind. I liked the sheep and grew to love my time walking and thinking under beautiful blue skies or huddling under a tree when it rained. I found myself talking to the Unseen One more and more. I thought of my parents and wondered again if time were passing back home at the same pace as it was in Marus. I prayed that the Unseen One would somehow let them know I was all right. I remembered, too, what my parents had said to me about my being special—about how I had been a gift to them, which they knew they’d have to give back to God.

Legginth often called me to the main house in the evenings to talk about the history of Marus and the traditions of those who’d been chosen by the Unseen One. Legginth also gave me assignments to read from various history books about Marus. Then, one night, he brought out his own set of the Sacred Scrolls, which gave more-detailed accounts of the Unseen One’s works.

I now learned the names of the kids who'd come from my world before. Each had been given a specific task to do, and then when it was done, they had disappeared, presumably back to my world. I had hoped that I might recognize some of the names and imagined meeting them when I returned. But none of the names were familiar.

Legginth also gave me a notebook and pens. "Write down everything that's happened to you," he instructed. "Keep a chronicle of it all. Maybe the Unseen One will add it to the Sacred Scrolls."

I laughed at the idea that anything I'd written would be called sacred, but Legginth wasn't amused. I did what he asked.

One day during my second month with Legginth, when I was a full day's walk from Legginth's home, the sheep began to act very nervous. Starion, the sheepdog who often came with me, began to bark at a nearby grove of trees. I stood with a staff in hand, watching and smelling the air for any hint of what might be coming. A cold wind suddenly blew, and I felt a chill cover my body.

Suddenly, Draven stepped out of the woods and walked toward me. He looked older now, his hair longer and graying. But a fire burned in his eyes more vividly than ever before. I stood where I was and waited to see what he would say or do.

"You're cold," he said.

I was shivering now but didn't know what to say to him.

He took off his coat and draped it on my shoulders. "Come on, Scott," he urged gently. "The time has come. We have work to do."

"What about my sheep?" I asked.

"They're no longer your worry," he answered and looked beyond me.

I turned to look. Legginth stood on the crest of the hill with Watern, and they waved at me.

"Can I go and say good-bye?" I asked.

"Not now. You'll see them again."

I waved back. I was mystified by what was happening and suspected I might be having another dream. But Draven headed for the grove, and I followed.

"Where are we going?" I asked as we slipped into the shadows of the trees.

"We have unfinished business with Mobeck and Skalaw," he said firmly.

I drew his coat around me and stopped. "Wait a minute," I said, suddenly feeling ridiculous. "Hold on just a cotton-picking minute."

Draven stopped and turned to me. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" I asked indignantly. "What's *wrong?* You ditched me with Gwynn and then disappeared for more than two months while I risked my life trying to find you, and then you suddenly show up, and I'm supposed to follow you back where I might get killed by Mobeck and Skalaw?"

Draven put a finger to his chin for a moment, as if he had to think about it. "That's right," he finally said.

I shook my head. "Not so fast. I don't want to go anywhere until I understand a few things."

"What do you want to know?" he inquired and gave an impatient sigh.

"Well, for one thing, where have you been?"

"Not that I have to answer your questions, but I will because you are now a chronicler and need to write it down. When I ran from Deptford, I ran because I was scared. I thought Mobeck and Skalaw would come to their senses and turn to the Unseen One after time was restored. When they didn't, it frightened me. So I came to Eastcliff to hide. I was depressed and upset. I wanted to meet the Unseen One and tell Him my feelings. I wanted Him to know how alone I felt. I wanted to hear clearly from Him again before I did anything else in His name."

"And what happened?"

"I got my answer from Him on the beach."

"So it *was* you! You were kneeling next to a fire."

He nodded. "Did you witness the storm?"

"Yeah."

"And the tidal wave?"

"Yeah!" I said, excited to have the mystery solved. "Was that the Unseen One? Was He sending a message?"

"It was the Unseen One, but the message didn't come in the storm or the wave. It came after, in a voice as gentle as a lamb's fleece. It covered me and comforted me. It told me that I am not alone. Those who are still faithful and ready to serve Him surround us. I also learned that you were to be trained, and then we would go back to face those who want us killed."

"But I still don't see how I fit into all this," I admitted.

"The Unseen One has chosen you to succeed me."

"Succeed you? You mean, I'm supposed to be your replacement?"

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"Well . . . no," I stammered. "I mean, I don't think so. But if I succeed you, what happens to you?"

"Leave that to the Unseen One."

"Okay. But what's going to happen to *me?* How long will I stay in Marus? I read about the others from my world and how they did their jobs and went home. When will I go home?"

"That's up to the Unseen One."

"But what about my parents?"

"They've been expecting this."

I thought of my dream about my parents in the cave. I thought of all the times they'd talked about my being special. "But I want to say good-bye to them," I protested. "Am I allowed to do that?"

"Have I ever chained you up or forced you to follow me?" He waved his hand ahead of us. Through the trees, I could see a house. It was *my* house!

I looked at Draven.

"Go on," he said.

I ran for it. I cleared the woods in seconds flat and raced across the lawn to the front porch. I took the steps two at a time and burst through the front door.

Everything seemed like a dream now. Maybe it *was* a dream. My mother and father were sitting in the living room. My father was reading a book, and my mother was doing the crossword puzzle in the newspaper. They looked up at me as I entered the room. I felt like a returning soldier who'd been away at war. My father slowly stood up, the book sliding from his lap to the floor, his face an expression of surprise. My mother gasped and threw herself on me. She pulled me close, hugging and kissing. Then I felt my father's arms around me, and the three of us stood in the living room and cried. I didn't know why they were crying. Maybe I'd been gone longer than I thought. But I cried, too—at the feel of them and the smell of my mother's perfume and my father's cologne.

All this happened without words. It was as if we couldn't speak. My mother and father stepped back from me,

as if to look me over. With tears streaming down my face, I told them why I was there. “I came back to say good-bye,” I explained at the end.

My mother held a tissue to her nose and dabbed her eyes. She nodded. My father reached out and patted my head the way he always did when he was proud of me but couldn’t find the words to say. Like an electric current, an understanding passed between us. They *knew* a day like this would come. They *knew* I was going to be taken away. “To do something special,” they’d always said. But now I realized those weren’t just wishful thoughts or mere words on their part. They *knew* it would happen for real. And now it had.

I was still confused by their silence. Why didn’t they speak?

“Can’t you say anything to me?” I asked.

My mother checked her sobs long enough to say, “We love you.”

My father forced a smile, then took off his glasses and wiped his eyes.

We hugged each other again, and I buried my face in their arms. I tried to lose myself in the darkness of that embrace.

“It’s hard, I know,” Draven said. I looked up. He was holding me close, patting me on the back. “All who are called are called to sacrifice. We must give up before we can take on.”

We weren’t in my home or even the woods anymore. The rumble beneath my feet and the noise of rushing wind told me we were in a train carriage. Thin lines of light came through the slats in the woodwork. The train whistle blew, and I could feel that we were slowing down.

“Hailsham?” I asked.

Draven nodded and pulled open the carriage door. It was daylight outside. “The Unseen One has a message for Mobeck and Skalaw,” he said and leaped off the train.



We journeyed from the Hailsham station across fields that were now familiar to me. We passed by the smaller village of Deptford and Gwynn's estate. The house had been rebuilt by Mobeck's soldiers and turned into a barracks. Rather than cut across the land, we followed the stone wall around to where it ultimately connected to Mobeck's private residence. There the wall had been knocked down. Construction was well under way for a large swimming pool and tennis courts.

"So they got what they wanted," I observed.

"They've got *more* than they wanted," Draven replied.

A guard stepped out from behind a tree. He pointed his rifle at us and threatened, "Don't move or I'll shoot."

"Put it away!" Draven snapped. "You're going to take us to the people we want to see anyway."

"I'm taking you to—" The guard stopped, realizing that Draven had already said what he was about to announce. "Oh. But don't try any tricks."

The guard marched us into the mansion. Other guards appeared, then retreated when they saw Draven.

"Where is Supreme Commander Mobeck?" the guard shouted at a nervous-looking servant.

"In the observation room," he replied, then ducked into a room.

We continued down the hall to a set of doors. The guard knocked loudly.

"What do you want?" Mobeck asked through a small intercom speaker on the wall.

"Vindall here, sir. I have Draven and his accomplice."

"You do?" the voice went up in pitch. "Where do you have them? In the prison?"

"No, sir. They are right here."

“Here? In my home? Did you catch them, or did they come on their own?”

“They came on their own,” the guard answered.

“By the two moons!” A buzzer sounded, and the two doors sprung open. The guard gestured for us to go in.

The room looked like a warehouse for an electronics store. Monitors were attached to the walls. Large gadgets with knobs and dials filled rows of tables. Some had speakers that buzzed, while others occasionally squealed. Mobeck appeared from behind a stack of machines that could have been computers.

“In a million years, I never thought you’d have the nerve to come back here,” Mobeck said jovially. He’d obviously regained his confidence since I’d last seen him. “Would you like coffee or tea? I could also bring in some humble pie.” He chuckled at his little joke, but he stopped when he saw the dark look Draven gave him. “What, no sense of humor? Never mind, then. Why don’t you come over here and look at these plans? I’ve annexed Gwynn’s property next door and want to do some wonderful things with it.”

Just then, Skalaw came through the door like a descending vulture. “So you came back!” she hissed. “I’m astounded. Guards! You know what to do with them!”

Several guards appeared in the doorway and trained their guns on us.

“Now, wait,” Mobeck said to his wife. His voice had gained an edge to it. “He came all this way from wherever he was hiding. It must have been for a reason.”

Skalaw turned on her husband. “You’re too indulgent! If you were a real man, you’d have killed him ages ago and given me his teeth on a necklace.”

Mobeck laughed nervously. “Perhaps for your next birthday.”

Draven stood silently.

“By the two moons, it’s awkward when you don’t say anything!” Mobeck told him.

Skalaw chuckled. “Maybe he’s afraid to speak. He might burst into tears and run away again.”

I stepped forward to give them a piece of my mind, but Draven put his hand on my shoulder.

“Well?” Skalaw asked. “Don’t waste any more of my time. Or do you run out of tricks when you don’t have a big

audience?"

Draven met their looks with a cold eye. Finally he declared, "The blood of Gwynn has cried out to the Unseen One."

Mobeck looked perplexed. "Gwynn? You came here to talk about Gwynn?"

"Your reign of lies and treachery is coming to an end." Draven pointed to one of the large television screens behind Mobeck. An image slowly appeared, blurry at first and then clearer as Draven spoke. "Where the blood of Gwynn was spilled, so will you fall."

The image filled the screen. Mobeck lay on the floor of the Hailsham city hall. He was dead—there was no mistaking it. He was surrounded by men who jeered and taunted his lifeless body. The image froze on the screen.

Draven continued, "Every man you considered a friend is becoming your enemy. You will be cut off from all you have trusted. The world will laugh when they remember the name of Mobeck."

Mobeck shoved his fist in his mouth and bit it, crying, "No!"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Skalaw commanded and slapped her husband.

Ignoring her, he cowered where he was, his eyes fixed on the image.

Draven pointed to a second monitor. "Skalaw, you have sold yourself and the people of Marus to pagan gods. The Unseen One has decreed your future."

"I won't look!" she shrieked. "I don't want to see!" But she couldn't resist it. She turned to see what was on the screen, and what she saw filled her with horror. Her dead body was being devoured in the streets of Sarum by vultures. "No!" she screamed and pointed accusingly at Draven. "You can't do this to me! I won't let you! Guards, take them away! I want them shot now! Do you hear me? Kill them now!"

But the guards stood still. They seemed mesmerized by the images on the screens.

"Somebody do something!" Skalaw cried out as she sank to her knees. She put her face in her hands and wept in loud, heaving sobs.

"Now you have seen the end," Draven told them. "But you don't know how or when it will come. Let that knowledge

punish you until then."

Draven tipped his head toward the door for us to go. We walked toward the guards, and they cleared the way for us.

"Wait, Draven!" Mobeck shouted. He stumbled into the hall and fell at our feet. "Mercy! Have mercy on me! Tell me what to do, and I'll do it! Please!"

Draven turned to him. "You know what to do. You have always known. But you've been too self-serving to do it." Then he strode down the hallway.

"Don't leave," Mobeck said tearfully, clutching at my leg. "Please."

I pulled away from Mobeck's reach and followed Draven out of the mansion.

I hadn't noticed before what a beautiful day it was. Birds were singing, and I could smell fresh-mown grass. It was an odd contrast to the oppression inside.

Draven took a deep breath. Without meaning to imitate him, I did the same. We looked at each other and smiled.

"It's not the last time we'll have to deal with them, is it?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, no," Draven answered. "But they won't be the same after today."

We headed back for Hailsham. Somewhere in the middle of a field, I stopped to look around. With a feeling of finality, I thought, *This is home now*.

The fields were green and stretched out to the village, while the land in the opposite direction was covered with woods. The sky was a rich blue. On the horizon, storm clouds gathered.

"Where are we going now?" I asked Draven.

"Wherever the Unseen One sends us," he replied.

We walked on. And then I realized I was still wearing his coat.

PASSAGES™

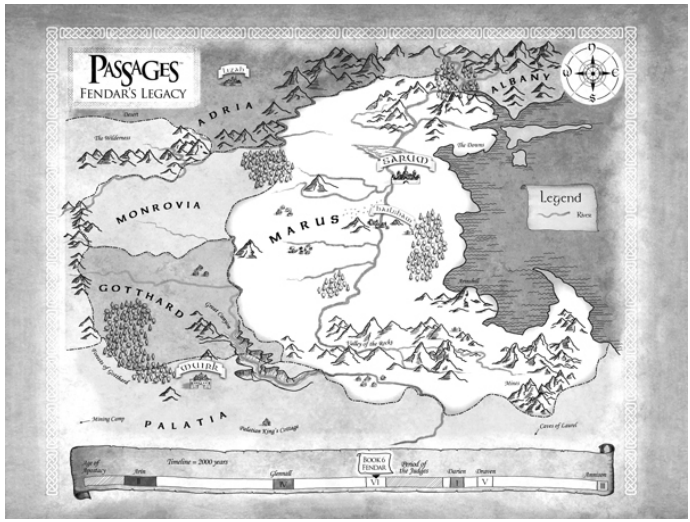
MARUS MANUSCRIPT 6



THE CHRONICLES OF THE DELIVERED

FENDAR'S LEGACY

Manuscript date: June 4, 1998


PASSAGES
FENDAR'S LEGACY
ADRIA
ALBANY
MONROVIA
MARUS
GABUG
GOTTHARD
PALATIA
Legend
River
Timeline = 2000 years
Age of Apostacy
Arin
Glennall
BOOK 6 FENDAR
Period of the Judges
Darien
Deseret
American

for Becky, James, and Emma





“Look at that!” Michelle Brewer exclaimed from behind the bushes.

Danny Taylor grabbed her arm and pulled her down. “Get down!” he demanded. “Are you trying to get us in trouble?”

“Ouch!” Michelle said and rubbed her arm. “Don’t ever lay a hand on me again, you male chauvinist!”

“What?” Danny asked, not sure what she’d said but suspecting from her tone that it wasn’t nice.

“You heard me.” She glared at him through her glasses.

Danny grunted and peered through the bush toward Trickle Lake. Though it was midafternoon on a hot summer’s day, a bonfire raged along the shore. Dozens of teenagers—maybe even hundreds, Danny thought—were milling around the lake and in the nearby forest. Tents had been set up around the various campsites and picnic tables. Loud rock music blasted through a sound system that had been set up by the dock. A peculiar smell filled the air.

It was June 1968, and this was a music festival spontaneously arranged by a group from the nearby community college. Word had gone around town, and somehow Michelle had heard about it. Danny wasn’t surprised. Michelle somehow heard about *everything*, whether she was supposed to or not.

The crowd of young people had started to gather at Trickle Lake around noon. Most of them were students, with long hair and Day-Glo headbands, psychedelic jewelry and tie-dye shirts, bell-bottoms and sandals, and peace signs and radical placards.

“I told you they were going to have a festival today,” Michelle gloated. “Didn’t I tell you?”

To be honest, Danny didn't much like Michelle. She was bossy and talked a lot and had to have everything her own way. She was the kind of girl who annoyed all the boys and got on the nerves of all the girls. Mostly her opinions got her into trouble. She always complained about how men were Neanderthals who oppressed women and said that one day women would rule the universe so they could truly be free. Danny figured Michelle expected to be the president when that happened.

So why was Danny with her now? He had no choice. Michelle was his cousin, and his parents expected him to be her friend when she came to visit, which she did every summer as soon as school was out.

Danny got the impression that Michelle was sent to them because everybody else was too preoccupied to deal with her. Michelle's mother was in Cleveland, busy running a political campaign for a seat in Congress. ("Summer is a hectic campaigning time," he'd heard her say.) And Michelle's father, who lived with his new wife in Seattle, was too busy with his new family. So it became Danny's chore to keep Michelle entertained and out of his parents' hair.

Today he had thought they were going to go play at McCalister Park, but then she had sprung this idea on him right after they had left the house.

"There's a big hippie festival up at Trickle Lake," she had said. "Wouldn't it be groovy to see it?"

"No," Danny had replied honestly.

"I want to see it!" Danny's younger brother, Wayne, had chimed in.

But Danny had snapped at Wayne to go home. It was bad enough having to put up with Michelle. He didn't want his little brother tagging along too.

Wayne had pouted and gone back to the porch.

Michelle had then ignored both Danny and Wayne, climbed on her bike, and taken off in the direction of Trickle Lake. Danny had leaped onto his bike and gone after her. The entire way up, he had argued with her until he was breathless. He had said they would get into trouble. He had said the students would yell at them for being there. It had been no use. He had thought about turning around and letting her go on her own, but he knew his parents would blame him if they got home from work and anything had happened to her.

"That's the life," Michelle said now, gesturing to the hippies from behind the bushes. "Freedom to do whatever you want, whenever you want. When women are in charge, this is how it'll be."

Danny wasn't impressed. It looked like nothing more than a big cookout. His family had them all the time, but without the long hair, loud music, and weird clothes.

A twig snapped behind them. Danny and Michelle spun around. Wayne stood there with an impish grin on his face.

"What are you doing here?" Danny cried out in a harsh whisper.

"Mom and Dad didn't want me to be home alone, remember?" Wayne responded, sounding like a smart aleck.

"You're 10 years old. You know how to be home alone."

"But Mom said—"

"Oh, be quiet and get down before somebody sees you!" Michelle snapped.

Wayne stooped down and crab-crawled over to them. "What's going on?" he asked as he tried to squeeze between them to see.

Danny frowned. "Nothing," he said disgustedly. "It's boring. Let's go home."

"Not yet," Michelle said. "You know what? I think it's safe."

"Safe? Safe to do what?" Danny asked.

Michelle started to crawl around the bush.

"What are you doing?" Danny asked, his voice rising in pitch.

"I want to mingle."

"Mingle! Are you nuts? They don't want some *girl* hanging around."

"They won't care. They're too laid-back to care." She came out from behind the bush and stood up, then took a scarf out of her back pocket and tied it around her mop of black hair. She adjusted her glasses on her freckled nose and stepped confidently toward the lake.

"I don't believe it!" Danny said with a groan.

Michelle wandered in and out of the clusters of students who were drinking out of cans or nibbling from bags of food they'd brought. No one seemed to notice her.

"She's right," Wayne said. "Nobody cares."

"That's only because it's so crowded."

"Then we can go look around too," Wayne suggested. "It's going to get even more crowded pretty soon."

"No, we're staying—" Danny stopped in midsentence because something about what Wayne had just said caused him to think twice. "Wayne, what do you mean it's going to get more crowded?"

"Because of all the police cars."

"*What* police cars?" Danny asked, a sick feeling growing in his stomach.

"The ones I saw driving up when I was following you. They would have beat me here if I hadn't cut cross-country."

Danny grabbed his brother's shirt. "The police are coming? Why didn't you say something?"

Wayne shrugged. "I wanted to see them bust everybody."

"But if they bust everybody, they'll bust *us*, too!"

"Oh," Wayne said. "I didn't think of that."

Danny scrambled to his feet. "You stay here," he ordered. "I'll go get Michelle."

Feeling about as conspicuous as an elephant at a party of pink flamingos, Danny made his way down to the small dock, which was the last place he'd seen Michelle. The music blasted through the speakers and pounded his head. A gruff voice sang about going on a magic carpet ride.

Danny felt a tug at his sleeve.

"You're going in the wrong direction," Wayne said and pointed. "She's over there."

"I told you to wait behind the bush!" Danny shouted at his brother.

"But you were going in the wrong direction," Wayne offered in his defense.

Danny pulled at his brother's arm. "Stay close to me."

No one seemed to notice them. The students had all gathered in small clusters, where they were chatting about things like the Vietnam War, a place called Berkeley, the Democratic Party convention in Chicago, and other things Danny didn't understand. A few sat around guitar players and smoked strange-looking cigarettes. Unlike Michelle, who talked constantly about what a great life she thought this was, Danny didn't like this party at all.

"Where is she?" he muttered irritably—and then walked right into her.

“Watch where you’re going!” she shouted at him over the music. She adjusted her glasses and scarf and then fingered a necklace of beads.

Danny pointed at the necklace. “Where did you get that?” he asked loudly.

“That lady in the tent over there gave it to me.” Michelle gestured broadly.

Danny glanced at the tent, where a young woman in a peasant dress and bright smile sat and offered homemade goods to whoever passed by.

“That’s what I’d like to do,” Michelle said into Danny’s ear. “Be free all day and make things in a tent.”

“Right now we have to get out of here!” Danny called over the blaring music. “The police are on their way!”

“What?” Michelle asked, tipping her ear toward Danny.

Danny spoke louder. “I said, the police are coming!”

A young man with a long mustache and granny glasses suddenly turned to Danny. “Did you say the cops are coming?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“I saw them first,” Wayne added.

The young man turned quickly to the group he’d been talking to and yelled, “Cops!”

The word shot like cannon fire around that group and then to other groups, and suddenly there was a wild commotion as the students threw down their cigarettes and scrambled for the trees. A whistle blew from somewhere and then another from somewhere else, and the police swarmed in, their dark-blue uniforms a strange contrast to the surroundings. The music abruptly stopped, the sound replaced with shouts from the police and the students. An officer with a megaphone announced something about this being an illegal assembly and for everyone to stop where they were. No one did.

“My folks are gonna kill us! We’ve gotta get out of here!” Danny yelled. But there was nowhere to run. The police had moved in from all sides, and Danny, Michelle, and Wayne found themselves squeezed onto the small, wooden dock that reached out into the lake.

“The boats,” Michelle said. There were small boats at the end of the dock, and she raced toward them. She seemed to think they could escape by paddling away. Confused about

what to do, Danny and Wayne followed her. The three of them reached the ladder that led down to the boats. A crush of people, all with the same idea, arrived seconds behind them. Unfortunately, the back of the crowd didn't stop when the front of the crowd reached the end of the dock. Soon people were being pushed into the lake. Danny saw Michelle go head over heels into the water. In the next instant, he and Wayne were forced in too.

Danny was a good swimmer and quickly pushed his way to the surface. He looked around for Wayne and Michelle but had a hard time seeing. Water was pouring down onto him from somewhere above, as if he'd come up under a waterfall. *But there's no waterfall at Trickle Lake*, he remembered, *so what's this falling on my head?* He kicked to get away from the annoying splashing but found that his feet touched bottom. He stopped, surprised. He knew for a fact that Trickle Lake was more than 10 feet deep here. Placing his feet firmly on the ground, he stood up. And up and up. And soon he found himself standing in knee-deep water.

He looked around. Michelle and Danny were also standing up, only a few feet away, with puzzled expressions on their faces. Danny couldn't believe his eyes. They weren't standing in Trickle Lake anymore but in the center of a huge fountain in the middle of a large city center.



Michelle's glasses had slid down her nose, and the scarf that had been tied around her head was now askew and cockeyed across her face. "What happened?" she shouted to Danny above the roar of the falling water.

Danny was dumbfounded. The three of them were standing in an enormous cement fountain. It had several tiers of water, all splashing down, one onto another, until it hit the bottom pool, where the three kids now stood. Danny looked at his feet to make sure he was where he thought he was. His feet appeared and disappeared through the white, foamy water. Coins littered the bottom and sparkled up at him. He rubbed his eyes, partly to get the water out and partly to make sure he wasn't seeing things. Everything was strange—and unusually bright.

"Get out of there!" a man shouted as he shook a cane at them. Danny looked up and took in the scene. The man had long whiskers and wore a black stovepipe hat and an open overcoat that revealed the stand-up collar on his white shirt, his black waistcoat, and black-striped trousers. He was joined by a woman with a pinched, disapproving look. She wore a frilly bonnet and a long-sleeved dress. Behind them, on a wide street, horses with riders and horse-drawn coaches moved past. Other passersby stopped to look at the three kids in the fountain.

"Where are we?" Wayne asked, his mouth hanging open in wonder.

"Didn't you hear me?" the man shouted again. "Get out of that fountain, or I'll summon the constable!"

Danny started making his way to the edge of the fountain. Michelle and Wayne followed. With a lot of splashing, they got out of the fountain and sat down on the

flat cement seat that circled the whole thing.

Several men and women watched them. “They weren’t there a second ago,” one of the women said.

“What odd clothes!” a man commented.

Danny looked down self-consciously at his wet blue jeans. “What’s wrong with my clothes?” he asked indignantly.

Wayne looked offended. “You’re the ones who look like you’re going to a costume party,” he challenged. “It’s a little early for Halloween, isn’t it?”

“Be quiet, Wayne,” Danny said.

“Early 1800s,” Michelle observed as she took off the scarf and adjusted her glasses.

“What do you mean?” Danny asked, growing more aware of the large number of people now staring at them.

“Their clothes,” she replied, then waved to their surroundings. “Everything. Don’t you see? It looks like the early 1800s.”

Danny didn’t know what she was talking about.

“Don’t they teach history in your school?” she asked impatiently.

But there was no time for him to answer. A man in a smart blue uniform and blue cap pushed through the crowd. A nightstick swung from his large, black belt. “What’s all this?” he inquired.

“They were swimming in the fountain,” the first man said.

“We weren’t swimming,” Michelle corrected him. “We were *standing*.”

“*I* was swimming,” Wayne said helpfully. “But that was in Trickle Lake before it became this fountain.”

The man in the uniform, presumably a policeman, clasped his hands behind his back and rocked back and forth on his hard, black heels. “Is that so? And why aren’t you in school?” he quizzed.

“Because it’s summer vacation,” Michelle explained in a tone that also seemed to say, “Don’t you know anything?”

“All right, come with me,” the officer said and reached out to take Michelle’s arm.

Michelle withdrew her arm quickly. “Where are we going?”

“That’s my business,” the man answered. “You just come along quietly.”

“My parents taught me never to go anywhere with strangers,” Michelle said as she moved away.

“Me, too,” Wayne chimed in and followed her lead.

“Is that how it’s going to be?” the officer asked, a threatening tone in his voice.

“I don’t like this,” Danny said to Michelle and Wayne.

The policeman moved toward them. “Come along with me, and we’ll get you sorted out.” He was reaching out again and was only a step away from Michelle.

“You give me no choice,” Michelle said to him. Then she shouted, “Run!”

The kids took off like sprinters who have just heard the starting pistol. Though they had no idea where they were going, they raced across an open square, then down the first street they saw. Their sneakers sploshed on the pavement as they ran across a large courtyard. A whistle blew behind them, and Danny wondered if all police officers carry whistles.

“This way!” Danny called without looking back. He ran down an alley between two large buildings. Wet footsteps echoed behind him. That alleyway led to another, which soon opened onto a major boulevard. Danny turned right and then right again down a slim pedestrian passageway. The footsteps followed, and he finally slowed down to assess who was behind him. Still going at a jog, he turned to look out of the corner of his eye. Wayne alone followed him.

“Where’s Michelle?” Danny puffed.

“I thought she was right behind me,” Wayne replied with a gasp.

Danny felt panicked and brushed past his brother to go back to the boulevard. Crowds of people—dressed like those they’d seen at the fountain—walked past. Horses clip-clopped and wagon wheels rattled on the road beyond. Michelle was nowhere to be seen.

“We have to go back,” Danny said. Suddenly the policeman emerged from an alley and looked around for them. Danny pushed Wayne back, and they retreated down the narrow passage. It doglegged to the left and then again to the right, taking them past dark doorways, dead ends, and alcoves. The buildings rose high above them, so high that the blue sky looked like a distant river in a gorge. Then, as they pressed on, the sky became obscured by disheveled wooden

balconies that hung tentatively from the walls. Lines of laundry hanging out to dry crisscrossed like unraveled balls of string.

Slowing down now, Danny became aware of how trash littered the passageway and an offensive smell filled the air. There weren't many seedy areas around town, but Danny recognized this as a place he didn't want to be in. The walls were scarred with wood rot and black from smoke. The boys jumped to a stop as a trash can tipped over. A scrawny cat emerged to give them an arrogant look. A woman with two dirty children disappeared into a doorway. A baby cried. A large, heavyset man appeared from another doorway, hitched up his trousers, spat on the ground, and walked in the opposite direction.

"Maybe we should go back the way we came," Danny suggested.

Wayne, who was also looking around with wide, nervous eyes, nodded. "Good idea."

As they turned to go, a thin man with wild hair and an equally wild beard stepped into their path from a nearby doorway. He was dressed in a long, tattered overcoat and smelled of cabbages. "Where are you going?" he asked with a leer. His teeth were misshapen and crooked.

Danny and Wayne glanced at one another, their feet itching to rocket them down the passageway. But the man dropped his bony hands onto their shoulders. His grip was tight.

"We're lost," Danny stammered.

"Are you?" the man asked, looking the two of them over. "That's most unfortunate."

Before they could cry out, he yanked them through the doorway and into a dark, smelly room.



Michelle hadn't been quick enough to get away from the policeman at the fountain—or the three other officers who appeared right after he blew the whistle. One held her while the others pursued Danny and Wayne. When they returned

from their fruitless search, the first officer dismissed the others and, with a firm grip on her arm, took Michelle to the local police station.

"You didn't catch them, huh?" she asked as they walked down the busy street.

"No, but I'm not sure what kind of friends they are to desert you," he countered.

Michelle frowned. "They're not my friends. They're my cousins."

"For family to do such a thing to family is even worse."

In her heart, Michelle agreed. It was a rotten thing to do, leaving her behind like that. At least they could have tried to come back to rescue her. "Are you going to put me in jail?" she asked.

"I might," he replied. "But first I have to notify your parents."

"Fat chance," Michelle replied. "My father is in Seattle with his new wife, and my mother is campaigning. That's why I came here in the first place."

But even as Michelle spoke the words, she knew something was wrong. This wasn't the *here it was supposed to be*. She'd visited Danny and Wayne every summer for the past four years. They had explored nearly every nook and cranny of the area. What she saw of this city looked nothing like any of the cities she knew.

At home, she had a complete illustrated set of the works of Charles Dickens. This city reminded her of the pictures in those books. Winding streets with horse-drawn carriages; street vendors; gentlemen with top hats and ladies with broad skirts; tall, dark buildings; the spires of old churches and columns of chimneys—this city seemed to have them all. But more than anything, she was struck by how bright and colorful everything looked, as if someone had overexposed the scene somehow. And though it made no sense to her, she asked, "Am I in London?"

"If you think you're being funny by using words I don't know, you're wrong," the officer said. "Now keep your trap shut until we get to the station."

The police station was a plain, brick building tucked away at the end of a cul-de-sac. The policeman marched her inside and sat her down in an uncomfortable wooden chair in a large room filled with other wooden chairs and desks. "Stay

here," he said firmly, then disappeared through a doorway.

Blue-uniformed men came and went, sometimes with a sinister-looking man or a crying woman. Michelle watched them indifferently. Her brain was working overtime, trying to figure out where she was and how she'd gotten here. She retraced everything that had happened at Trickle Lake—the arrival of the police, the race down the dock, falling into the water—but there were no clues.

After a few minutes, the officer returned with a man who wasn't in uniform. He wore a waistcoat and trousers like many of the men in the street. He was heavyset, with a moon-shaped face and white hair pulled back in a ponytail. He said a few quick words to the policeman, who tipped a hand to his cap and left. The heavyset man approached Michelle.

"Come along, child," he said with a wave of his hand.

"Where are we going?"

"To my office, of course. We need to have a little chat."

They walked down a corridor and into a small office. The man gestured for Michelle to sit in a chair as he took a seat behind his desk. He had to move a large oil lamp to have a clear view of her.

"I'm Chief Constable Rombold," the man said. "I'm in charge here."

"I'm Michelle Brewer."

He folded his arms on the desktop and said, "I don't normally take an interest in the scamps and urchins my officers bring in, but you're an unusual case. It is my understanding that you and your cousins suddenly appeared out of thin air in the Memorial Fountain."

"I guess so."

"Can you explain how you got there?"

"No, I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because . . ." Michelle then took a deep breath and told Rombold everything that had happened up to her arrival in the fountain.

Rombold listened attentively. He betrayed no sign of whether he believed what she was saying. After she finished her explanation, he let out a long sigh. "That's quite a story," he observed.

"I know."

Rombold gazed at her for a moment. "On any other day,

I might have taken you for a cheek-faced liar and thrown you in jail. But today is different." He held up a single sheet of paper that had been sitting on his desk. "We've received this communication from the palace—from Nemathes himself, in fact. Apparently, he and his wizards have determined from the alignment of the stars that something cataclysmic is about to happen to Palatia, and it will be centered in Muirk."

Michelle shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't know what Palatia or Muirk are. Or a Nemathes, either."

Rombold tilted his head, as if to discern whether she was telling the truth. "Muirk is the city you're now in. It is the capital city of the country of Palatia—*our* country. King Stefan is our ruler, and Nemathes is the king's supreme adviser in all matters of state."

"So I'm not in London," Michelle observed.

"No, you're not."

"Or anywhere in the United States of America or the planet earth?"

Rombold smiled as if they were playing a word game. "I've never heard of them."

"So either I'm crazy or you are."

Rombold tapped the piece of paper. "Or Nemathes is."

"Why is he crazy?" Michelle asked.

"Because he's been waiting for you."

Before Michelle had a chance to think about what he meant, there was a knock at the door. Rombold shouted for the person to enter. A man in a silver coat and breeches appeared. "Where is she?" he asked.

Rombold pointed to Michelle.

The man stepped in to get a good look at her. "I hope this isn't a wild goose chase," he said. "Nemathes won't be pleased if it is."

"If what he says is true—and what *she* says is true—he won't be disappointed," Rombold asserted, nodding to Michelle. "Good-bye, Michelle."

The man in the silver clothes guided Michelle to her feet. "Where am I going now?" she asked.

"To the palace," Rombold answered.



"Put your back into it!"

Danny and Wayne were on their hands and knees, scrubbing a filthy stone floor. The man who had yanked them from the alley turned out to be the owner of an inn. His name was Scurge, and the inn was called the Wilderness Inn. Both the man and his inn were dirty and dreary.

"Slavery is against the law," Wayne complained.

Scurge booted him in the rear end hard enough to make him fall to his stomach. The bucket of brown water splashed and tipped over.

Danny leaped to his feet and faced the ugly, old codger. "Leave him alone!" he demanded.

"Shut up!" Scurge said and smacked Danny on the side of the head. It made stars dance in front of his eyes. "You two behave, and you won't get hurt. I need a little help, that's all. My normal boys ran off. I've got to have the place cleaned up for the customers tonight. I'm even willing to pay you, if you're nicelike. But if you're gonna complain, I'll tie you up and throw you in the cellar for the rats to nibble on."

Danny and Wayne exchanged glances, refilled the bucket, and went back to work.

"That's better," Scurge said as he turned to leave. "And don't forget to scrub under those tables and chairs." Then he stopped and added, "Don't get any ideas about escaping, either. The doors and shutters are all locked tight."

After Scurge left, Wayne leaned to Danny and whispered, "What's going on here?"

"I don't know," Danny replied. "Everything has happened so fast that I haven't had time to think."

"I was hoping maybe this whole thing was a dream until he kicked me," Wayne said. "But I *felt* that," he added,

rubbing his backside.

Danny shook his head. “It’s not a dream. Somehow when we fell into Trickle Lake, we wound up here.”

“Just like the Wizard of Oz! We’re having a fairy-tale adventure!”

“It’s not an adventure!” Danny snapped. “This is serious.”

The two boys scrubbed for another few minutes.

“But how do we get back home?” Wayne eventually asked.

Danny looked around for Scurge, then said, “I think our first problem is getting out of this dump.”

Wayne leaned back to face his brother. “I say we knock him out with the bucket and run for it.”

“And if it doesn’t work, we’re done for,” Danny countered, then looked fully at his brother. Something was different about him, but at first he didn’t know what. Then he realized what had changed. Wayne’s eyes, which had always been dark gray, were now different colors. “What happened to your eyes?” Danny asked.

Wayne’s mouth fell open with surprise. “What happened to *your* eyes?” he said in amazement.

“Yours have changed colors. One is blue, and the other is green.”

“The same with yours!” Wayne exclaimed.

Danny touched his eyes. “Really?” He thought about it for a moment. “I wonder if there was something in the fountain water that did it, like chlorine or something. Have you noticed how bright all the colors are?”

“Yeah,” Wayne said. “I thought it was just me.”

Scurge suddenly appeared in the doorway. “Quit your jabbering and get back to work!” he shouted.

The boys worked hard all afternoon, scrubbing the floors, the tables, and the chairs. Then Scurge had them clean all the dishes and help him roll out the barrels of drinks for the customers that night. Next, just after they’d lit all the lamps and candles and he was about to open the doors for business, Scurge grabbed Wayne and threw him into the cellar. He locked the door with a large key.

“Why’d you do that?” Danny asked as Wayne pounded on the door.

“Because I need you to serve tonight. I won’t have to

worry about you running out the door with him locked up in there, if you know what I mean."

Wayne kept pounding on the door until Danny told him to stop. "Just take it easy!" Danny called to him.

"But it's dark in here," Wayne complained. "And I think I hear things moving around."

"I'll figure something out," Danny assured him. But he felt ill because he had no idea how to get them out of this predicament.

Scurge opened the inn's doors and shutters. A handful of men entered, all of them looking as if they'd crawled out from under the same rock as Scurge. They could have been pirates from *Treasure Island* or ruffians from *Oliver Twist.* Whoever they were, Danny's heart sank at the sight of them. They wouldn't help him or his brother even if he begged for it.

Soon the inn was packed with customers, and Danny ran himself ragged keeping up with their demands. He had to juggle trays of drinks and the greenish selection of cold meats Scurge put on offer. If Danny made a mistake or accidentally spilled anything, someone smacked him on the head or gave him a hard kick. He started to feel like a giant bruise.

Later, he went to the cellar door and knocked. "Are you all right?" he asked his brother.

"Just sitting here," Wayne replied.

"You're not afraid, are you?"

"Not anymore."

Danny was surprised. "Why not?"

"I've been praying for help," Wayne replied.

Scurge rounded the corner just then and glared at Danny. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I was checking on my brother."

Scurge caught hold of Danny's shirt and started dragging him back to the customers. Danny tried to get away, but Scurge kept up with him, slapping him until they were in the main dining room.

"Help!" Danny cried out.

No one even looked up.

"You see?" Scurge hissed. "Nobody cares."

Suddenly, a tall, imposing man stood in front of them. He was dressed in a buckskin coat and trousers, rough-sewn leather boots, and a coonskin cap. He had a rugged face and

bushy beard and mustache. He carried a large satchel and a long walking stick, which he rapped on the counter.

Scurge looked up at the man nervously, then gave Danny a shove. “Go on. Get back to work,” he ordered.

The tall man put a restraining hand on Danny’s shoulder. “Wait,” he said in a low voice. He glared at Scurge. “In my day, you wouldn’t get away with this kind of abuse.”

Scurge was scared but defiant. “It’s none of your business,” he insisted.

“Seeing you beat this boy makes it my business,” the man said. He looked down at Danny, and they made eye contact. Danny gasped. This man had different-colored eyes too, one blue and the other green! A flicker of surprise crossed the man’s face as he noticed the same about Danny’s eyes. “You don’t belong here, do you?” he asked Danny.

“No, sir.”

Scurge sneered at the man. “Are you going to drink or not? The boy has work to do!”

Quick as lightning, the man grabbed Scurge by the lapels. “This boy doesn’t belong here,” he said softly but with a clearly threatening tone.

“Let go of me!” Scurge squirmed, trying to free himself from the man’s grasp. The room went quiet.

“I’m leaving now and taking this boy with me,” the big man declared.

“My brother,” Danny said. “He’s got my brother locked in the cellar.”

“You can’t!” Scurge whined. “These boys work for me!”

A man from another table stood up. He had a patch over one eye. “What’s this all about?” he challenged.

The man glared at him silently.

The one-eyed man hesitated, sized up his opponent, then sat down again. “Never mind,” he said.

The man shook Scurge. “Keys, please,” he demanded.

Scurge fumbled in his pockets and pulled out a key. “It’s this one.”

“Let your brother out,” the man told Danny.

Danny snatched the key from Scurge and raced back to free his brother.

“What’s happening?” Wayne asked as he stepped into the hallway and rubbed his eyes.

“We’re getting out of here.”

"Far out! I'm glad I was praying."

When Danny and Wayne returned to the front room, the man let go of Scurge. "Your day is ending," the man said. "A new day is coming. You have my word."

"So *you* say," Scurge growled. "I don't know who you think you are, coming in here like this."

The man picked up an old apple from the counter and pushed his fist against it. Only then did Danny notice that he had a large ring on his forefinger. The man tossed the apple to Scurge, who looked at it closely.

Scurge went bug-eyed. "The royal seal? Your ring bears the royal seal?" Scurge swallowed hard and searched the man's face. His face fell with recognition. "Can it be? *Prince Fendar?"*

The change in the room was immediate. All heads turned toward them in a stunned silence.

The man gestured for Danny and Wayne to head for the door. "Let's go," he instructed quietly.

"You've come back?" Scurge called after them. "You *dared* to come back? The king's men will kill you if they find you! I'll tell them and collect the reward myself!"

Danny and Wayne stepped outside. Scurge was still shouting as the man also crossed the room. He kept an eye on the customers, then closed the door to the inn behind him. Night had fallen, and thick clouds obscured the sky. The city street was deserted. Dim lights from candles and lamps dotted the doorways and windows, splashing a dull, yellow glow on the cobblestone streets.

"Are you really a prince who's wanted by the police?" Wayne asked, impressed.

"Yes."

"Where are we supposed to go now?" Danny interrupted.

"I'm supposed to meet someone here, so let's stay close." The man gestured to the dark entrance to an alley. "We'll wait there."

When they were safe in the shadows, Danny thanked the man for helping them.

"You're welcome," the man said. "Now, what are your names?"

The two boys introduced themselves.

The man bowed slightly. "As you already heard, I am

Fendar." He then stepped aside to allow some of the light from the street lamp to shine on their faces.

"Both of you are voices," the man said, a hint of awe in his tone.

Danny was confused. "Are what?"

Fendar tugged at his beard thoughtfully. "We haven't had a child sent to us as a voice since . . . since the days of Connam. And now we have *two*. What are you doing here?"

"We don't know," Danny replied.

"Did you come from Marus?" Fendar asked.

Somehow Danny knew the names of their towns or cities wouldn't mean anything to Fendar. "I guess you could say that we're lost," he admitted.

Fendar pondered this for a moment. "There are only two of you?"

"Michelle, our cousin, is around somewhere too."

"We lost her when they chased us from the fountain," added Wayne.

The man looked at the two boys as if he understood something that Danny hadn't figured out yet. Danny wished he would explain it to him, but just then the sound of footsteps came echoing up the cobbled street. A minute later, a man as large as Fendar approached the Wilderness Inn, and Fendar stepped out to intercept him. "Wondrar!" he whispered.

The man swung around to Fendar, then rushed across the street. The two men clasped each other in a warm and robust embrace. By the street lamp, Danny could see that the other man looked like a slightly older version of Fendar, but he had a trimmer beard and was dressed in the fashion they'd seen all day. Danny thought again of how Michelle had said that the styles were like those from the 1800s.

Wondrar held Fendar at arm's length, his eyes misty with tears. "I had a dream that you'd come back to Muirk—that you were here in this very spot," Wondrar said. "I hardly dared believe it. But I had to find out for myself, so I rushed out of bed to come here." He laughed and waved a hand at his shirt. "This is my bed shirt!"

"The dream was from the Unseen One," Fendar explained. "It was the only way to tell you to meet me."

"It's a good thing I take my dreams seriously," Wondrar said, then suddenly hugged his brother again. "And I thank

Him that He brought you back safe and sound."

Fendar laughed. "For such a formidable older brother, you always were a soft touch."

Wondrar dabbed his eyes. "Look at you! The forests of Gotthard have turned you into a wildebeest."

"Am I not fashionable?" Fendar asked, taking feigned offense.

"Only to another wildebeest," Wondrar answered with a laugh. He then turned his attention to Danny and Wayne. "Are these your children?"

"No, no," Fendar responded. "I've just met them. But I believe they're important to why I've come. Look closely at their eyes."

Wondrar did. "Ah!"

"And there is a third child. I'll wager my boots that she's a voice as well," said Fendar.

"I see."

"But *I* don't," Danny said impatiently. "What's going on here?"

"I'll explain as much as I can later," Fendar said. "Where is it safe to go?" he asked Wondrar.

"A friend of mine is a tradesman who travels abroad for a wealthy Palatian. He has an apartment on the edge of the Marutian district that you can use."

"The Marutian *district?"*

"Yes, we've all been herded into our own part of the city. We have our own shops, our own commerce, a governing council—everything we could possibly want. We come out only to work."

"Is it a ghetto?" Fendar asked.

"No. On the contrary, it is comfortable and well cared for by the king and his governors."

Fendar looked unhappy. "How shrewd. No wonder the desire to return to Marus has all but vanished."

Wondrar agreed. "Under these conditions, few Marutians think of themselves as slaves. One or two small rebel groups try to keep the flame of freedom alight, but most of the people don't want to hear about it. They don't want to ruin a good situation."

"I will want to meet with the rebels," Fendar stated. "I will want to meet with *all* the leaders of our people. A change is coming. The Unseen One has promised it."

"Still, meeting with our leaders is a dangerous idea. There are spies everywhere. The king will know you've returned."

Fendar gestured to the Wilderness Inn. "I've already announced my arrival. I have no doubt that someone is on the way to tell the king even now."

"He'll kill you."

"Let him try."

Bewildered and tired, Danny walked with Wayne a few steps behind Fendar and Wondrar. The two men chatted on and on about people and places Danny had never heard of. He wished someone would stop long enough to tell him what was going on. Keeping mostly to the smaller streets and alleyways to avoid the police, they eventually came to a part of the city with buildings that looked like a new apartment complex. This was the Marutian district of Muirk. The entire area was enclosed by a high wall. A single large gate was the only way in or out.

"Everyone calls it 'the Promised Land,'" Wondrar explained as they passed through the gate. "Some say so facetiously, while others mean it sincerely." Wondrar led them to a brownstone building and up a flight of stairs to a door. He felt along the upper edge of the doorjamb and found the key that would let them in. Wondrar stepped in first and began to light a lamp and then various candles.

The apartment was small and cozy. It had a main living area with chairs and a sofa, a dining table, and a kitchenette. A small hallway led to two bedrooms beyond. Once they were settled in, Wondrar announced he would leave right away to talk to the Marutian elders and the rebel leaders. "You should be safe here until I come back," he said and left.

"I'm so confused," Danny told Fendar. "Will you *please* tell us what's happening?"

"Tell me your story, and we'll try to figure it out together," said Fendar.

Danny, with occasional interjections from Wayne, explained to Fendar everything that had happened to them.

"So you are from another world," Fendar concluded.

"We are?" Wayne asked, amazed. "We're like creatures from another planet?"

"In a sense, you must be."

Danny eyed Fendar skeptically. "You don't seem very

surprised," he said.

"This isn't the first time the Unseen One has brought children to us from another world."

"What is an Unseen One?" Wayne asked.

"Not *what* but *who,*" Fendar explained. "The Unseen One is the Supreme Creator, the God of all gods, the true King and Master of all."

"Oh! We have one of those in our world," Wayne said enthusiastically. "But we call Him God."

"Then He is the same as the Unseen One. The Lord is One."

"But what are we doing here?" Danny asked. "Why did He bring us here?"

"According to our Sacred Scrolls, the Unseen One promised to bring about our freedom through three children. The Sacred Scrolls say:

'By the word of a child, the signs will begin.
By the word of a child, the heart will deny.
By the word of a child, the clouds will rise.'"

"But what does that mean?" Danny asked.

"I assume we'll find out in time." Fendar suddenly frowned. "What did you say became of your cousin?"

"We don't know," Danny answered.

"I'll bet she was caught by the police," said Wayne. "She was never a very fast runner."

"In that case, the king probably knows you're here."

"So?"

"That means the whole palace is probably worried."

"About *us*?*"* asked Danny, surprised. "But why?"

"The Palatians have their own beliefs, including books and sayings that involve a lot of wizardry and nonsense like that. But sometimes, rarely, they get part of the story right. According to their Ancient Oracles, they know that three children are to come whose arrival will signal the rise of a new power. They believe it is a power that may one day destroy all of Palatia. So, naturally, they're afraid of it."

Danny shook his head. It was all too much to believe. "But we don't belong here! We can't be the three children you're talking about."

Fendar smiled through his thick beard. "We'll see about that."

Without meaning to, Wayne yawned.

Fendar stood up. “It’s late. You both need some sleep.”

“But you promised to tell us your story,” Wayne argued.

“I will—*after* you get some rest.” He ushered them into one of the bedrooms. It had only one bed, but the bed was large, and the two boys could stretch out without bumping into each other.

The last thing Danny wondered as he drifted to sleep was how he fit into this whole adventure. Were he and Wayne and Michelle really part of some ancient prophecy? And if they were, what were they expected to do?



Michelle opened her eyes and looked around. Everything was a sleepy blur, but she knew right away that she wasn't in her bed at Danny and Wayne's house. She sat up quickly and tried to rub the sleep from her eyes. She was in a large bed with a canopy. Thick curtains hung on tall windows. Tapestries decorated the walls, most of them with crests of a giant eagle standing in the middle of a garland. A huge fireplace adorned the far wall, red embers dying in the grate. Her clothes and sneakers were on a rack next to it. Deep brown paneling covered the rest. It was luxurious. It was like being in a palace.

The palace, she suddenly remembered.

The king's guard had taken her to the palace known by all as Muirkostle. It had ornate front gates and a long expanse of lawn and a driveway leading to the front door. Made of gray stone, with towers and turrets springing up from different sections, it seemed to Michelle to be a fairy-tale castle.

She had been ushered by the guard through two enormous double doors and then led down a series of dark halls to a room. It looked like some sort of study, with three walls covered with fully stocked bookshelves and the fourth wall taken up by a fireplace. It had yawned blackly at her as she sat down in a velvet-covered chair. Above the fireplace had been a crest with a giant eagle standing in the center of a garland.

The guard had left her. As she waited, her eye had caught a piece of paper on a nearby table. The paper looked like the one Rombold had waved around. She had glanced at the door, then stepped over to the table.

"Be on the Lookout!" large, black letters had shouted

from the page. Underneath, in smaller, crudely printed type, it had said, “An announcement from His Majesty’s adviser.” After that had been a paragraph that said,

> The King’s seers have determined from the configurations of the stars and the signs of the Ancient Oracles that we are on the threshold of great concerns. Be on the lookout for three children of unusual speech, manners, attributes, or clothing. If you encounter any three children or a single child who fits this description, dispatch an urgent notification to Nemathes at Muirkostle.

Michelle had read the page three times before it suddenly dawned on her what it meant. “They think I’m one of the three children!” she had said to herself.

“Aren’t you?” a deep voice had asked from the other side of the room.

It seemed like a dream to her now, but at the time Michelle had cried out and nearly knocked over the small table. She had looked at the door, sure someone had come in without her hearing, but no one was there.

“Well?” the voice had asked again, and Michelle had looked over by the fireplace. The man had stood with his arm resting on the mantelpiece, as if he’d been there for some time. Michelle had wondered how he had gotten into the room.

Confused, Michelle had answered, “There were three of us. But I don’t know anything about stars and signs.”

The man was completely bald and had a slender, waxen face. Michelle hadn’t been able to guess his age. He had been dressed in a robe of deep red that was open at the front. Beneath that he’d worn a black shirt and trousers, in the style of the kinds of clothes she’d seen already.

“There are 12 signs from the Ancient Oracles,” the man had said, his voice seeming to shake the rafters. “These signs are to be the mark of the rise of a great country to the north, a great people from whom will come the Great Message from the Leader who will one day rule the world. One of the signs

is the appearance of three mysterious children who claim to come from another world and who will do wonders to help give birth to the new nation. Naturally, I was concerned to hear about three children who suddenly appeared in the Memorial Fountain."

"I don't know how we got into the fountain."

The man had then eyed her from head to foot, which had given Michelle the creeps. "You are dressed rather strangely. And according to the chief constable, you claim to be from places we've never heard of. Perhaps you've come from another world?"

"I don't know about that," Michelle had said. "But if I'm supposed to do some kind of wonders, nobody told *me* about it."

"Where are your friends?"

"My *cousins* ran off. I don't know where they are."

"They left you to fend for yourself? All alone in this big city?" The man had moved toward her, his hands clasped in front of him. "How rude."

"What do you expect? They're boys."

"We'll have to find them for you. It wouldn't be to anyone's advantage if anything bad happened to them."

"Serves them right for leaving me behind," Michelle had said.

The man had suddenly looked closely at Michelle's eyes.

It had made her nervous, and she had instinctively stepped back from him.

"Ah, I see," the man had said.

"See what?"

The man had ignored her question and said in a voice as thick as his velvet robe, "The king would be upset if anyone thought he were less than a genial host to . . . a special *foreigner*. You will stay here at the palace as our guest. Whatever you want, we will provide."

"I'd like to let my sneakers dry. They're still wet."

"Of course," the man had said. "My name is Nemathes, by the way."

And so Nemathes had brought Michelle to this room. He had arranged to have something brought for her to wear while her own clothes dried next to the fire. He had also had a servant, a woman named Morgon, stay at her beck and call for the rest of the day. She had eaten two wonderful meals of

food she couldn't identify but certainly enjoyed. Morgon had also accompanied her for walks around the grounds and gardens of the palace. The colors of the summer day had dazzled her. The grass was the greenest she'd ever seen. The reds, purples, and yellows of the flowers were incredibly vibrant. *It's amazing,* she had thought.

Morgon wasn't very talkative and hadn't readily answered any of Michelle's questions. Finally she had gotten Morgon to tell her a little about where they were and a brief history of Palatia's rise as one of the greatest powers in the world. Muirk was its showpiece, the crowning glory of all that Palatia's kings had achieved over the past few hundred years. King Stefan, Morgon had said, was the greatest of all the kings.

That night, Michelle had gone to bed with her head swimming with the wonder of Palatia. Though she'd still had no better idea about why she was there than when she'd first stepped out of the fountain, she had realized things could be worse. At least she was comfortable and the guest of the king himself. Sort of.

Once or twice she had thought about Danny and Wayne and wondered where they were. She had secretly hoped they were miserable. *That'll teach them for running off without me*, she had thought.

Michelle's thoughts were brought back into the present as Morgon came into the room with a tray of food. It was a full breakfast of eggs, toast, something that tasted like bacon, baked beans, mushrooms, and tomatoes. While Michelle ate, Morgon left and returned with clothes for Michelle to wear that day.

"What's wrong with my own clothes?" Michelle asked. "They should be dry by now."

"Your clothes aren't appropriate—not for today," Morgon answered, laying out a silk dress of purples and light blues.

"What's so special about today?" Michelle asked as she admired the dress.

"You're going to meet the king."

Michelle's heart leaped. She was going to meet a king!

Morgon helped her to dress, then opened a door to a wardrobe that had a large mirror inside. Michelle stepped up to it to brush her hair. It was the first time she'd looked at

herself since she'd arrived in Palatia.

She gasped and stepped back, dropping the brush and putting a hand to her mouth.

"What's wrong?" Morgon asked.

"My eyes!"

"What about them?"

Michelle took off her glasses and looked more closely at her reflection. "They're different colors!"



Fendar woke Danny and Wayne the next morning. He startled them at first because he had shaved off his beard and mustache. He was still a ruggedly handsome man, with sun-baked cheeks and dancing eyes, but now they could see the square and determined jaw that made him look truly princelike. He'd also gotten rid of his wilderness outfit and put on a white shirt, black coat, black trousers, and black boots. Danny guessed him to be about 50 years old.

Danny and Wayne had a dozen questions they wanted to ask Fendar, like how he was a prince but was wanted by the police, why he'd been away from Palatia for so long, and what were the forests of Gotthard that Wondrar had mentioned. But they didn't get a chance, as Wondrar arrived shortly after they sat down to a simple breakfast of eggs and toast.

"I've arranged a meeting first thing this morning," he said. "I have to warn you, most of the elders weren't pleased to hear of your return. They think it's a portent of trouble."

Fendar sighed. "Are they so blinded by the comforts and security of Palatia that they've forgotten who they are—and where they belong?" he asked.

Wondrar didn't reply.

"Hopefully their eyes will be opened by what I have to say."

"What *are* you going to say?" Wondrar asked. "You haven't told me much, you know."

"I will tell everything there is to tell at the gathering of the elders," Fendar promised, putting his hand on his

brother's arm. "But you are vital to the Unseen One's plans."

"I'm happy to be of service," Wondrar replied.

Once they had eaten their breakfast, Wondrar insisted that they make their way to the gathering of the elders. The Promised Land by day was a beehive of activity. The Marutians all wore nearly identical clothes—the dull-gray uniforms of servants. Wondrar explained as they walked that the Marutians would spread out over the city to take their positions as household servants, factory workers, or office clerks. Others would go out to the fields to work the livestock or crops. They weren't paid directly for their work but were given vouchers that could be used in the shops and service centers of the Marutian district.

In a sense, the Marutians were given nearly everything they could reasonably expect in exchange for their hard work. But they weren't allowed to leave the city without permission, nor could they ever rise to become anything more than servants. King Stefan maintained a firm but seemingly benevolent control over his slaves. Occasionally a policeman strolled through the area.

They entered a one-story building that served as a community hall for the district. Several men were already waiting as Fendar and Wondrar went to the front. Danny and Wayne sat down in a couple of chairs off to the side. The men watched them suspiciously. No one spoke to either Fendar or Wondrar until a few stragglers arrived, took their seats, and the doors were closed.

A man with thin silver hair stood up and addressed himself to Fendar. "As Wondrar and the rest of our colleagues already know, I am Regmund, the chief elder of this assembly," he began. "I was a friend of your father's while he was still alive, may the Unseen One keep him in peace. I believe you know most of the men here." To this Fendar nodded. Regmund continued, "So tell us what this is all about. You must know the great risk we are taking by meeting with you, a fugitive."

"As I have risked much by coming back to you," Fendar said seriously. "But the Unseen One has sent me, and I must obey Him." Fendar scanned the crowd and said with a hint of accusation, "I assume we Marutians still believe in the Unseen One."

Another older man with deep wrinkles and white hair

pounded his hand on the chair in front of him. “Don’t take a self-righteous tone with us, young man,” he snapped. “While you were being wet-nursed and coddled in Muirkostle, I, Elder Langton, and the rest of us were down here, worshiping the Unseen One you now claim to serve.”

A couple of the men said, “Here! Here!”

“You speak true, Elder Langton,” Fendar said calmly. “But you’ll remember that it was not my choice to go to Muirkostle. I was taken there as a baby and nurtured as a member of the royal family by King Akaron and Queen Leviatha. They raised me as their own child, alongside Stefan, who is now the king. But surely you have heard the story.”

“Not from *your* lips,” another elder said.

“Then let me speak openly. I was raised as a Palatian without knowing I was a Marutian. No one told me of Marus, that great country to the north. In my sheltered upbringing, I had come to believe it was a barren wilderness, inhabited by nothing but wild animals. How could I know of its former greatness, or of how our ancestors came to Palatia during the Great Famines in the time of Connam?”

So he was a slave boy who was adopted by the king and raised to be a prince, Danny thought. *That’s not such a bad deal.*

“But on the day as a young man when I found through a servant that I was really a Marutian, I took the news to heart. In secret, I sought out my family and finally met my older brother, Wondrar, and my sisters and my parents. Also in secret, I studied the history and traditions of my people. And, as you well know, this put me in disfavor with the king when he found out—especially when I affirmed my belief in the Unseen One.”

The group of elders listened in silence.

Fendar continued, “The king and his family tried to force me to stay away from you, the Marutians. But I couldn’t. My heart burned for you. I saw what the king was doing to you—killing your spirit and your will to be free through the bribery of comfort and security—and it brought tears to my eyes day in and day out. I yearned to be with you, body and soul.”

Pausing for a moment, Fendar lowered his head as if the memory of what he was about to say was a heavy weight on him. “Then came the day when I learned of the king’s plot to drive my family out of Palatia by force. The king mistakenly

thought that if I could not see my family again, I would forget my lineage and heritage. But my true father, a man of indomitable spirit, refused to leave Muirk without me. He defied the king's soldiers, who then began to beat him terribly. I witnessed this and intervened. In the struggle, I accidentally killed one of the soldiers."

"So *that's* why he's a wanted man," Wayne whispered.

"My fate was sealed. I knew I couldn't help my family or any of the other Marutians while I was considered a murderer, so I escaped west to the forests of Gotthard. There I made a living for myself, married, and have hidden away all these years—until the Unseen One told me to come back."

"He *spoke* to you?" Regmund asked.

"Yes, He did."

"You will have to be more specific than that," one of the elders said.

"I will. He spoke to me from the mouth of a baby lamb."

The elders muttered among themselves. A couple of them laughed.

"I was walking through the forest one day and came upon a pasture. In the middle stood a single lamb. I thought the lamb had somehow been separated from a flock, but then He *spoke* to me." He paused to let his statement sink in. "'Child,' He said. He spoke to me as clearly as I am speaking to you now. I fell to my knees and hid my face, because I *knew* in my heart that this was the Unseen One. But I dared to ask the lamb for proof.

"'Behold,' the lamb said to me. Suddenly, a chalice appeared on a nearby rock. I hadn't noticed it before, and I would have had it been there when I first walked up. The chalice began to glow, as if from a bright lamp inside.

"'Drink from the chalice,' the lamb said. 'Drink until it is empty.'

"My fingers trembled as I took the chalice and drank from it. It was the purest water I had ever tasted. To this day, I feel refreshed in my very soul to think about it.

"Then the lamb said, 'There was a time when the Marutians called to Me for deliverance from their slavery, but now they have become as the Palatians. I heard their cries, and now I hear their silence. The time has come for all Marutians to return to their true home in Marus.' Even as I

marveled at those words, the lamb commanded me to bear the responsibility for the journey home. 'You will lead them out,' He said."

The elders now openly scoffed. "We've heard enough!" one shouted.

Fendar held up his hands for silence. "I couldn't believe it, either," he continued after they had calmed down. "I told the lamb it was not possible. As a prince of Palatia, I felt like an outcast from my own Marutian people. I was also a murderer and an outcast from Palatia. If I tried to lead, who would follow?

"But the Unseen One was firm in His call upon me and said He would empower Wondrar to be my helper. He commanded me to leave my wife and children and return to Muirk immediately. And then a most wondrous and mysterious thing happened."

Fendar paused to survey the room. He swallowed hard, as if he knew this would be the most difficult thing to explain. "Suddenly, the lamb began to bleed from wounds that appeared in His feet and His side. I didn't understand it at all and rushed forward to help. But He commanded me to stop. He said, 'My innocent blood has been shed for you in ways you cannot know, but they will be revealed at the right time. Collect my blood in the chalice, and carry it to Palatia. You will need it there.' So I picked up the chalice and held it close to the lamb's feet and side. Then I covered it and have carried it with me in my satchel." Fendar waved toward his satchel, which he had hung from a hook on the wall.

Danny and Wayne looked at each other. It all sounded strangely familiar to them from church and yet, in ways, unlike anything they'd ever heard before.

"I have obeyed the Unseen One, and I am here to lead the people of Marus out of Palatia," Fendar concluded in a firm voice. "We are not meant for this land but for another—our true home."

Regmund stood up. "Thank you for telling us your story, Fendar," he said coldly, "but I think I speak for all present when I say that your words, while inspiring, are also impractical. First, you will have a hard time convincing most of our citizens that it would be in their best interests to leave their lives and homes here to go to an untamed wilderness. Yes, it was the home of our ancestors, but is it ours? This we

do not know."

"The Unseen One made a promise to Marus himself about the future of our nation," Fendar countered. "We are to be a light to the world, the messengers of a great truth. But we are neither as long as we are the *slaves* of Palatia."

"Slaves?" one of the elders cried out. "You dare to call us slaves? Is that how this new generation of upstarts refers to hard work and industry? We came to this land as strangers, and we have become accepted."

"Yes," Fendar said with a nod. "Accepted as *slaves*. Don't be fooled by the so-called generosity of the king. Remember, I lived in the palace for years. I heard their plans. They decided to lull you into peace, to dull your hearts to messages of freedom by giving you houses that are not your homes and food you cannot claim as your own. They have seduced you to sleep, and even now you slumber."

The elders were indignant at this. Some stood up as if they might walk out.

A young man with curly, brown hair and a thin beard stood and shouted at them to calm down. "Listen, brothers!" he cried out. "Don't be too quick to reject what Prince Fendar —"

"Fendar, please," Fendar corrected him. "I do not accept the title."

"I am Jakin," the young man went on. "I am a leader of a small group who believe as you do."

"I knew it wouldn't be long before you'd speak up," an elder complained.

"You can count on us to help in any way we can," Jakin told Fendar, who looked at him gratefully.

Langton banged his chair against the floor. "This is all idealistic nonsense!" he complained. "Even if we wanted to go, King Stefan would not let us. Why would he sit back and let his best working population leave?"

"That's right," agreed Regmund. "How will you convince the king to let us go? You haven't the power to do it."

Without answering, Fendar walked over to Wondrar. "My walking stick," he said. It was leaning against the wall, and Wondrar handed it over. Fender walked to where Regmund stood and held the stick close to him. Before everyone's very eyes, it transformed into a sword. Everyone

took a step back except Regmund, who seemed glued to his chair. Danny and Wayne were on their feet now. With both hands, Fendar lifted the sword point down and drove it into the floor. He let go and stood back.

"What is this?" Regmund asked anxiously.

The handle of the sword suddenly moved and shook as thin, vinelike branches shot out from it. Then from the branches sprouted leaves until a miniature tree stood in the center of the hall.

Fendar said, "If we put our faith in the Unseen One, our nation will flourish like a tree beside a deep river."

Regmund was clearly astounded but still unyielding. "Magic tricks?" he asked. "You're going to convince King Stefan by performing magic tricks?"

No sooner had he said those words than the branches reached out for him like a hundred spindly fingers. They wrapped around him and drew him close for a terrible embrace. Before he could lift his arms to fend them off, they had him circled and covered. In a matter of a minute, he was wrapped in a cocoon of wood and green. From inside, they could hear him gasping for air.

Langton and the rest of the elders begged Fendar to free Regmund. "He'll suffocate in there!" one said.

"Have mercy," Langton pleaded.

Fendar stooped down and grabbed the bottom of the tree. It quickly withdrew its branches from Regmund, leaving him to collapse to the ground, struggling for breath. In the twinkling of an eye, the tree had disappeared completely and Fendar once again stood with a walking stick in his hand.

"Far out!" Wayne said softly.

Fendar gazed coolly at the gasping Regmund and told him, "It's a mistake to *ever* call the works of the Unseen One *magic.*"

The elders now looked at Fendar with more respect, if not outright fear, and waited to hear what he would say next. But Fendar didn't speak. He retrieved his satchel from the wall and headed for the door.

"Wait!" Jakin called. "What are you going to do?"

"We are going to meet the king," Fendar replied. He waved a hand toward Wondrar, Danny, and Wayne and said, "Come on."

Danny and Wayne both pointed to themselves and

asked, “Who, *us*?”



Michelle went through all the possible reasons her eyes might have changed colors, but to no avail. She'd never heard of eyes changing colors in someone her age. Ever.

Nemathes arrived to escort her to the king. He approved of her outfit and said she looked lovely. Then they walked together down various halls to the king.

As they went, Michelle asked hesitantly, "Do you notice anything strange about my eyes?"

Nemathes gazed at her eyes and nodded. "They are beautiful," he replied.

"But they're different colors," Michelle said. "And I don't know why. My eyes were hazel before."

Nemathes stopped at a large, gold-framed door. He faced her and explained, "There are legends of children with powers—remarkable powers—who had eyes like yours. Perhaps you are one of those children." He opened the door, then whispered, "I believe you are."

They stepped into the room to meet the king.

Michelle liked King Stefan right away. He was tall and good-looking, with a strong physique and piercing eyes. A ringlet of gold rested on his sandy-colored hair like a fallen halo. He had a trim beard and mustache that framed his full lips and made his smile larger and brighter than it might have been without them. Michelle figured he must be in his late 30s or early 40s.

They met in his reception room, where he was consulting with his advisers. He stopped everything when Nemathes brought Michelle in. He rose from his throne, took her hand, and kissed the back of it.

"This is, indeed, an honor," he said.

For the first time in years, Michelle actually giggled.

She blushed and then remembered what Nemathes had told her to do. She took up the folds of her dress and curtsied. “Thank you, Your Highness,” she responded.

The king signaled, and his advisers left the room. Only Nemathes remained. A servant brought a chair over and placed it near the throne. Above the throne was the now-familiar crest of the eagle and garland. “I want to hear all about your adventures,” the king encouraged. “Nemathes has told me some of it, but I think it would be better coming from your lips.”

Michelle adjusted her glasses and told the king everything that had happened to her. She concluded by saying, “Sometimes I think I’m in a wild dream. I don’t know how I got here, and I’m not even sure any of this is real.”

King Stefan had been listening attentively, with his face resting against his hand. He lifted his head and looked playfully affronted. “You wouldn’t relegate us to the land of dreams, would you?” he asked. “Not so soon after we met. What if you were to wake up right now? Then I wouldn’t have a chance to get to know you better.”

Michelle giggled again.

“But there’s this other business to think about,” the king continued. “According to Nemathes, whom I trust with my life, your appearance here is part of an ancient prophecy. What do you know about that?”

“I’ve never heard of it before, Your Highness,” Michelle answered.

“You came with two boys, you said.”

“That’s true. But they don’t know anything about it, either. We just showed up, that’s all.”

The king looked thoughtfully at Nemathes, then said to Michelle, “You’re too charming to be a threat to me. So I can only assume you are here to do me good somehow. Legends speak of children being wiser than men. And I know of other legends about children from other worlds affecting the fate of nations. Perhaps you have been sent from your world to advise me, to lead me into this new age Nemathes keeps talking about.”

Michelle smiled. “I’ll help if I can.”

“Good!” the king said as he slapped his hands on the armrests of the throne. “Then our first order of business is for you to stay at my side. I want you to witness what happens

here in the palace and tell me what you think."

Michelle gasped. "You want to know what *I* think?"

Nemathes cleared his throat. "Majesty, is that wise?" he asked. "She is a *girl* after all. Many of your advisers and council members might take exception to having a *girl* attend your meetings."

"What does her being a girl have anything to do with it?" King Stefan retorted sharply. "As my chief adviser, I would expect you not to be so narrow-minded. If the great powers that rule our world have sent me a girl to be my helper, who am I to reject her?"

Nemathes bowed stiffly at the rebuke.

King Stefan winked at Michelle. And Michelle knew then that she liked the king *a lot*.



Throughout the morning, the king made sure to introduce Michelle to all his advisers and councillors. She liked being treated special. And even though some of them gave her wary glances, she was resolved to stay true to her job. She would listen carefully and advise the king when he asked.

Unfortunately for her, most of the meetings were about things she barely understood. They talked about farming output, industrial productivity, economic imports, fiscal yields, budgets, labor problems, and so on. She found her brain getting thick with boredom.

Then something happened to cause a stir. A messenger arrived late in the morning, went straight to the throne, and whispered in the king's ear. King Stefan's face registered the news. He cheeks burned, and he leaped to his feet and shouted, "He's here in Muirk? And he dares to come here to the *palace?* Is he insane?"

Nemathes was the only one who had the courage to speak. "To whom do you refer, Majesty?" he asked.

"Fendar, who else?" he roared. Michelle and everyone else squirmed in their seats as Stefan began to pace. Then he suddenly pointed an accusing finger at Nemathes. "And don't tell me you didn't know about this, Nemathes. You know

everything that goes on in this country. A cockroach doesn't sneeze in the Caves of Laurel without you hearing about it."

Nemathes bowed, as if to concede to the statement. "I had heard Prince Fendar had returned—"

"Don't call him *Prince!* No one is ever to call him that! He was an illegitimate child who betrayed my father and my entire family." King Stefan fumed. "I'm glad my parents are not alive to see this day."

"What is your pleasure, Your Majesty?" the messenger, now quivering, asked.

"My pleasure? To have him executed for murder, what else? Why is he not here before me in chains? That's what I want to know. Did he walk the streets freely, and no one in my command had the courage to arrest him?"

"The guards tried to seize him," the messenger said. "But they could not."

"Oh? And why couldn't they?"

The messenger shuffled his feet nervously. "He has some sort of . . . of magic, Sire."

"Magic!"

"Whenever the guards approached him, he held up his walking stick, and it . . ." The messenger hesitated as if he had difficulty believing what he was saying.

"Well?"

"It blinded them, Sire. With a terrible pain. Five of your soldiers have been taken to the hospital."

"Well, Nemathes?" the king asked. "Magic is your domain."

"I would have to see it to assess it, Majesty."

The king glowered at the messenger. "Where is he now?"

"Waiting in the Great Reception Hall. He has another man—his brother—and two boys with him."

Michelle sat up in her chair. "Danny and Wayne!" she exclaimed.

The king shot her a disapproving look and warned, "You'd do well to curb your excitement, my dear. If they are here for a treasonous purpose, I don't think you'd want to be numbered among them."

"Danny and Wayne wouldn't do anything like that," Michelle assured him.

"Let's meet them and see," the king said and strode out

of the room.

In a long procession, they marched from the king's council chambers to the large reception hall near the front of the palace. Michelle made eye contact with Danny and Wayne as soon as she entered the room. Their mouths went slack and their eyes bugged out at the sight of her. She smiled, pleased that they were surprised. She wondered if they might come over to talk to her, but they didn't. They remained a few steps off to the side of two tall men who also looked like brothers. One man had a beard, and the other was clean-shaven. Michelle guessed that the clean-shaven one was Fendar, but only because he carried the large walking stick.

The king did not look at Fendar or his company when he walked in. He went straight to his throne at the far end of the room and sat down. Only after a deafening silence did he lift his head and look at his former foster brother. "You have come back," he said. His voice was calm and betrayed none of the anger he'd shown in private.

Fendar bowed respectfully. "I have, Your Highness," he replied.

King Stefan observed to Nemathes, "At least he still acknowledges me as king."

"You *are* the king," Fendar said as he stepped closer. "And I come to you because you are a great king and have authority over this country."

Stefan raised his eyebrows. "You flatter me. What do you want? Clemency?"

"Mercy, Sire."

"Mercy! For whom, *you*? Have you come to ask the court's forgiveness for the murder you committed so many years ago?"

Fendar stiffened but made an effort not to be affected by the king's comments. He smiled coolly. Michelle was aware that she was watching an amazing performance by both men. The undercurrent of tension between them was so thick that you could have cut it with a knife.

"I have come to ask for mercy for my people."

Stefan laughed. "*Your* people! And who might *your people* be?"

"The Marutians."

"Do they acknowledge you as one of their own? You, an outcast, a murderer? Have they sent you to represent them?

What has become of Regmund? He's the head elder. I speak only to him."

"My business with you isn't political but of a spiritual nature."

The king glared at him. "You jest. Have you become a priest during your years away?"

"I have come by the command of the Unseen One."

"The Unseen One is a Marutian notion. I don't believe in it."

"Nevertheless, the Unseen One laments that His chosen ones, the Marutians, no longer worship as they should."

"That has nothing to do with me. I never stopped them from worshiping their gods."

"The Unseen One would like me to take the Marutians out of the city and into the great forests to the north so they can learn to worship Him freely again, away from the influence of this city."

"Away from *my* influence, you mean."

"If you say so, Sire."

Stefan laughed again. "To take all the Marutians out of the city for a big summer worship camp would take days—days away from their work. My simple answer is no. If they want to worship anything, let them do it on their own time and in the privacy of their own homes."

Fendar was quiet for a moment, then said, "I have made the Unseen One's command to me a request to you, out of respect for you as king. But it remains a command. The Unseen One wants His people back. Please let them go into the forest with me—or suffer for your disobedience."

King Stefan stood up, his fists clenched with rage. "Are you threatening me?"

"I say only what I am told to say."

"How dare you!" Stefan growled. "By what authority do you, a fugitive, speak to me in this way?"

"The Unseen One Himself."

Nemathes suddenly stepped forward and said silkily, "Your Highness, perhaps Fendar can offer us some proof of his claims."

Fendar considered the challenge for a moment, then turned to Wondrar and handed him the walking stick. "Throw it down, brother," Fendar instructed.

Wondrar threw the stick onto the ground. To everyone's

astonishment, it turned into a hawk. It flapped its brown-and-white wings and flew to the top of the giant crest on the wall behind the throne. The hawk looked puny compared to the gigantic eagle.

King Stefan applauded and said sarcastically, “How delightful. Children’s party tricks.”

Nemathes approached the throne and, with a nod from the king, picked up the king’s scepter that had rested in a holder nearby. It was gold, with a hollow crown on the top. Inside the crown was a golden eagle. Nemathes closed his eyes and whispered something softly. Then he held the scepter upright in front of the throne. Everyone gasped as the golden eagle seemed to come to life, no longer gold but a bold black and white. It screeched and flew to one of the throne’s armrests. Then a second eagle appeared at the top of the scepter—and a third and a fourth—each one flying to the throne and perching on the armrests and the back.

Michelle watched this power play with amazement.

“How appropriate,” Stefan said proudly as he stroked one of the eagles. “We have outnumbered your scraggly hawk with the eagle, our greatest symbol.”

Nemathes then made a hissing noise and waved a finger at the eagles. They screeched loudly and flew toward the hawk as if to attack it.

Fendar held up his arm. Michelle thought he might be calling the hawk back for safety. But instead, the hawk stretched its wings and called out *kyah-kyah-kyah*. The wings fanned out wider and wider. Michelle blinked a few times to make sure she wasn’t seeing things, because she thought the hawk was getting bigger and bigger. The eagles suddenly banked away with a furious flapping of wings and a flurry of feathers.

The hawk swooped to follow them, its enormous talons outstretched, and before anyone knew what was happening, it snatched one of the eagles from the air. The remaining three scattered. The hawk flew to the other end of the reception hall as the captive eagle let out a terrifying squawk. The hawk then dropped its prey. The eagle fell to the floor and hit with a sickening thud.

One of the members of the court ran to the fallen bird and picked it up. Its head flopped to one side. “Its neck has been broken!” the man cried.

While this was happening, the hawk swooped at another eagle, catching it in its great claws. Again the eagle screeched in a terrible panic, then went silent and fell to the ground. The hawk went after the third eagle and then the fourth, with the same results. Banking in the air above them all, the hawk flew to Fendar. But instead of lighting on his arm, the bird dropped to his outstretched hand. And the moment they touched, the hawk stood up straight and stiff and became a walking stick again.

"You will see us again," Fendar said to Stefan, and then he spun on his heels and walked out of the hall. Wondrar followed. Danny and Wayne lingered, as if they wanted to talk to Michelle, but they seemed to give up and followed the two men out.

Anger turned Michelle's cheeks red. The two boys had left her behind *again*. Didn't they care? The least they could have done was to come over and talk to her. Obviously they wanted to get rid of her, to go off on their own. They had probably planned it this way all along.

She seethed as she thought about it, but then she looked at the king and found herself feeling a smug satisfaction. This time they had picked the wrong side. They were hanging out with a murderer. They obviously didn't realize how powerful Stefan was.

The king didn't look so powerful at the moment, though. His face was ashen as he inspected the four dead eagles. Michelle was close enough to hear him tell Nemathes, "I want your spies to tell me his every move. When the time is right, I will arrest him and execute him for murder."

"Yes, Sire."

Stefan lowered his voice. "What is his power? It's more than magic."

Nemathes nodded and said, "I suspect the two children have brought it with them."

Stefan looked at Michelle out of the corner of his eye. "Do you have power, my child?" he asked.

"If they have power, I must have it too," she guessed. "We came from the same place."

"It stands to reason," Nemathes agreed.

King Stefan pondered the thought, then leaned close to Nemathes. "If she has power, we will need her to fight whatever Fendar brings against us." He turned to Michelle.

“Will you help us fight against this murderer and rabble-rouser?”

“I’ll do my best,” she offered.

“But your cousins are with him,” Nemathes observed.

Michelle shrugged. “That’s their tough luck,” she said confidently.

Stefan commanded Nemathes, “I want you to take care of this special lady. She is to have all the privileges of my court. I will look to her to advise me about Fendar.”

Nemathes bowed again as Michelle grinned from ear to ear.



“What does she think she’s doing?” Danny grumbled as they left the palace. They were riding in a wagon behind Fendar and Wondrar, who was driving the single horse that pulled them along.

“Maybe the king kidnapped her,” Wayne suggested.

“She didn’t look kidnapped,” Danny countered. “Did you see how she was dressed? And she had that smug expression on her face. You know—the one she gets whenever she thinks she’s right and we’re wrong.”

“Maybe they brainwashed her.”

“Don’t be so goofy.”

“I’m not being goofy. Maybe we have to go back and rescue her.” Wayne tapped Fendar on the shoulder. “Excuse me,” he said, “but I’m really worried about our cousin.”

“Don’t be,” Fendar replied over his shoulder. “She is exactly where she’s supposed to be.”

“But she’s at the palace with the king. Isn’t she supposed to be with us?”

Fendar shook his head. “If she’s with us, she can’t fulfill her part in the work of the Unseen One.”

Danny slumped back. “You know what part she’s supposed to play?”

“Yes.”

“But how?”

“By keeping my eyes open.”

“If you know her part,” Wayne asked, “then what’s *our* part?”

“You’ll learn soon enough,” Fendar answered. “Just wait and see.”



Just a few hours later, things changed in the Promised Land. The news came while Fendar, Danny, and Wayne were having a late lunch at Wondrar's townhouse. Two small children, a boy named Maykar and a girl named Aintrar, played around their feet, and Wondrar's wife, Sainbry, had served them sandwiches and drinks when a knock came at the door.

"The king has proclaimed that we Marutians are obviously ungrateful to him," Regmund complained as he entered. He was clearly recovered from his earlier entanglements. "He has decided we must have too little to do if we think there's time to go off into the woods to worship, so he's adding an extra hour's work to our day. We have you to thank, Fendar."

"This is what I expected him to do," Fendar said calmly. "The Unseen One is prepared to persuade him."

"Persuade him how?" Regmund asked.

"That's up to Danny."

Danny nearly choked on his sandwich. "What?" he exclaimed.

"You will tell us how to persuade him."

"How am I supposed to know?" Danny asked.

"I suggest you consult with the Unseen One," Fendar answered.

Danny looked at him helplessly. "But—"

Fendar put a reassuring hand on his arm. "Finish your lunch, and then we'll take a walk together."

"Wait a minute!" Wayne protested. "How come *he* gets to decide? What about me?"

Fendar frowned at him. "You'll play your part at the right time. Be patient."

Wayne folded his arms and pouted. "I always have to be

patient."

"What am I supposed to tell the people while your orphans decide their fates?" Regmund asked facetiously.

"Tell them to trust in the Unseen One," Fendar said and took a bite of his sandwich.

Not surprisingly, Danny lost his appetite completely. How was he supposed to know what to do? He fidgeted while Fendar finished eating. Fendar talked about family matters with Wondrar and Sainbry. They reminisced about their parents and compared notes about raising children. Then, finally, Fendar indicated that it was time for a stroll. Wayne continued to pout as they walked out the door.

They walked silently, gazing at the apartment buildings and townhouses of the Promised Land. Men and women walked past on the sidewalk. Some ignored them, others did a double take at Fendar, while others scowled at him outright. Fendar didn't seem bothered about it at all. About a quarter of an hour later, they passed through the gate into Muirk itself and headed for the city center. Danny wasn't sure where they were going, and Fendar didn't walk as if he had any particular place in mind. Looking around at the city, Danny was struck again by the majesty of the buildings and statues. *This is a city that's proud of itself,* he thought. *Only a people who know they're powerful would build a city like this*.

For no particular reason, the idea stayed with him. *The Palatians are powerful and proud*, he found himself thinking again and again.

They walked into a great park in the middle of the city. Horse trails and paths led them to a lake, at the head of which was a large structure with long stairs and with high pillars holding up the roof.

"It's a mausoleum," Fendar said as they drew closer. "The royal family is buried there."

"Even your adopted mother and father?" Danny asked.

"Even them."

Danny realized as they reached the foot of the steps that the building wasn't made of marble, as he'd thought at a distance, but of a white gold.

"Wow," Danny said, hardly believing it.

"The older generations of kings and queens believed that you must be buried in great splendor so that Death would be impressed when it came for your soul," Fendar explained.

“They were also buried with gold coins in their pockets so they might bribe Death.”

“*Bribe* Death?”

“Yes,” Fendar said earnestly. “Bribe Death so it would take them to the realms of the gods.”

They remained at the foot of the building. A sad darkness lingered behind the large pillars. Danny had no interest in going farther.

Fendar sighed deeply. “The gold for this building came from the mines of Marus. It was built by the blood and sweat of Marutians. My people built most of the newest and biggest buildings in this city. For what? For a small house and basic comforts in a ghetto they call the Promised Land. For the glory of dead kings and queens who brought nothing into this world when they arrived and could take nothing with them when they left.” He paused and then added softly, “My people have forgotten that the Unseen One is the God of life. True life. Life beyond the comforts of this world. We were not made for this place, Danny.”

Danny listened quietly, then asked, “What am I supposed to do, Fendar?”

“The Unseen One will tell you,” Fendar answered.

“How?”

Fendar smiled. “You’ll know.”

They strolled back to the Promised Land. Once or twice, Danny thought he saw someone watching them from behind a tree or around the corner of an alley, but he dismissed it as his imagination. He had other things on his mind. He couldn’t shake the terrible feeling that everything was riding on him, but he hadn’t a clue about what to do.

Back at Wondrar’s, more elders arrived throughout the evening to complain about the added work King Stefan was giving them the next day. Fendar insisted that it was all to a good purpose, that they would be freed to go home to Marus where they belonged. But no one seemed to hear him. Some of the elders said that Marus was now the home of jackrabbits, thieves, and nomads. It was not their home.

Fendar indulged their complaints with a weary smile and assured them that they would see and understand in due time.

“So, Mister High-and-Mighty, what’s going to happen tomorrow?” Wayne asked Danny when they were back at the

apartment and getting ready for bed.

Danny shrugged.

"You don't know?" Wayne snorted. "Some great leader you turned out to be."

"Leave me alone," Danny said sternly.

Danny turned the lamp down and crawled into bed. Wayne's cold feet were waiting for him. "Get off my side," Danny ordered in a low, threatening tone.

Wayne moved over a little. "I have plenty of ideas about what Fendar can do to make the king change his mind," he declared.

"Good for you."

"I just don't understand why *you* get to decide. Just because you're the oldest, I'll bet. And you don't even know what to do."

"Just be quiet and go to sleep."

Wayne was quiet for a moment, then said, "I'd have Fendar call down lightning from heaven. Just like those guys in the Bible used to do. *Zap!* Then they'd be impressed."

"And what if the king's magicians can do the same thing?"

Wayne didn't answer at first. Danny hoped he had fallen asleep. "I'll bet they can't," Wayne finally said.

Danny groaned and rolled over. A light from somewhere outside shone through the curtains. Danny stared at it for the longest time. Someone must have eventually put it out, though, because at some point he was looking into darkness. It was the same kind of darkness he had seen behind the pillars at the mausoleum—a deep black that seemed to go back forever. Danny saw himself standing between those pillars, gazing into the mouth of the darkness. He could hear the sound of coins falling, as if someone were dropping them into someone else's palm. Was it the palm of Death? Was Death taking a bribe from the kings and queens?

Danny wanted to run away, but his bare feet moved forward. He felt gritty sand beneath his toes, as if he were walking on a beach. He glanced down and saw that he was walking on coins that were dissolving into dust. He felt as if he might sink and reached out to steady himself against a pillar. But the pillar cracked and then shook and moved. Danny feared it might collapse and bring the roof down on him. He stepped back. The steps beneath his feet also cracked,

as if someone had dropped a huge rock onto thin ice.

Then a voice spoke from somewhere inside. It was calm and reassuring, unlike any he'd ever heard. It was neither high nor low in timbre, nor loud or soft. Yet it spoke clearly, as if in his ear, but from somewhere far away, too.

"Bring it down, one piece at a time," the voice said.

"What do you mean?" Danny asked.

"Piece by piece," the voice said. "One piece at a time."

The mausoleum shuddered and shook and began to collapse in on itself. Danny raced down the steps to get as far away as he could. He reached the edge of the lake and stopped. Two moons were reflected in the water.

"Two moons?" he asked out loud.

"What?" Wayne asked from the bed.

Danny turned. He was now standing at the window, looking out at the night sky. He had no idea how he'd gotten there. "Two moons," he said again.

Wayne got out of bed and saw what Danny was seeing: Two moons hung together in the sky.

"Whoa!" Wayne said, impressed.

Danny went back to bed. He now knew what had to be done to persuade the king. And he fell asleep right away.



Early the next morning, Danny took Fendar aside and told him about his dream and his thoughts concerning the signs. Fendar listened and nodded. “The Unseen One has spoken through you,” he concluded.

Danny and Wayne went with Fendar and Wondrar back to the palace. The guards scowled at them but allowed them to go through without any interference. Because it was a gloriously sunny morning, the king was having breakfast with Nemathes and Michelle on a balcony that overlooked the rear gardens of the palace.

Michelle smirked at Danny and Wayne as the servant led them through the double doors onto the balcony. The silver on the coffeepots and cutlery gleamed in the sunshine.

“Well, look who’s here,” Michelle said in a voice meant to taunt them.

“I hope you’ve come up with something *really* big,” Wayne whispered to Danny. “We have to show her.”

“It’s not a contest,” Danny whispered back.

“Yes, it is,” Wayne countered.

Wondrar nudged them to be quiet as Fendar bowed to the king.

“I hope you’ve given my request further consideration,” Fendar said.

Stefan dabbed his mouth with a napkin. “I certainly have,” he replied. “Your people will experience the results of my consideration all day today. They will work as they have never worked before.”

“Then you will not let us leave?”

“No.”

Fendar gazed at Stefan somberly. “Then you yourself have chosen to set into motion the signs of your own Ancient

Oracles and the Sacred Writings."

"The Ancient Oracles spoke of three children. You have two. I have one. But I think this child"—he gestured to Michelle—"is equal to your two."

Michelle beamed at Danny and Wayne. Wayne growled softly.

Fendar turned to Danny.

Danny, realizing this was his cue, stepped forward to the king. He felt nervous and stammered through a dry voice, "The glory of Palatia will disappear before your very eyes before the morning is out."

"Oh, will it?" King Stefan replied with a smile.

"It will," Fendar said. "Then you will know that the Unseen One is more powerful than anything in which you place your hope. Gold and silver lead to ruin, but faith and obedience lead to everlasting life. You will let my people go free."

The king leaned forward on the table, the plates and cutlery rattling in response. "Fendar, your life is spared only because of my patience. Why am I patient? Because I admit to being curious about this game you're playing. I want to see how far you will take it." Stefan chuckled, low and without humor. "I remember when we played games as children. Just when you were on the edge of victory, you gave in. You pulled back to let the other side have a sporting chance. That's why you wouldn't have made a very good king."

Fendar looked down at the king, a staid expression on his face. "This isn't a game, Sire. And you would be unwise to treat it as such. Take what I say very, very seriously. The Unseen One wants His people to know Him again. And they will." Fendar leaned closer and added, "So will you."

Wondrar pulled a pouch of coins from his belt. They jingled as he placed them on the table. Fendar then nodded to him, and Wondrar lifted the walking stick until the very tip of it touched the pouch.

"What does this mean?" Stefan asked.

"Pick it up, Sire," Fendar answered.

The king gestured for Nemathes to pick up the pouch. It no longer jingled but hung heavy. Nemathes untied the top and poured the contents onto the table. The coins inside had turned to dust.

"Unless you let the Marutians go to worship the Unseen

One, all the wealth of the land will become as the coins in that pouch," Fendar warned.

"Nemathes?" the king said.

Nemathes looked at Fendar with jaded eyes. He stood up, shoved a hand into his vest pocket, and produced three shiny coins. He sat them on the table and waved his hand over them. They also turned to dust.

"More magic tricks." Stefan snorted.

"You'll see," Fendar warned. He nodded to Wondrar. They turned and walked off.

Danny hesitated for a moment, his eyes fixed on Michelle. "Please come with us," he requested.

"No way," Michelle replied. "You and Wayne should stay here."

"Yes! I'd love to have you stay here at the palace," the king affirmed, a teasing tone in his voice.

Wayne looked at Danny as if he thought they should agree.

"No, thank you," Danny said. "We don't belong here."

"Maybe *you* don't." Michelle snorted. "But *I* do."

"Suit yourself." Danny tugged at Wayne's sleeve, and they left the balcony.

Michelle watched them go. Why did they always have to be so stubborn? She pouted.

"I could have my guards stop them," the king offered, as if he knew what she was thinking.

Nemathes shook his head. "I don't believe Fendar would let you get away with that," he cautioned.

Stefan glowered at his adviser. "Let *me* get away with it? Am I not the king of this country?" He pushed his chair back angrily. "Nemathes, I'm beginning to think you *admire* Fendar."

"He has power, Sire," Nemathes said.

"Power to do what, a few magic tricks that you can mimic? I'm not impressed." The king frowned. "Did Fendar really think he could threaten me by turning a few coins into dust?"

The answer to King Stefan's question came later that morning. Michelle traveled with him and Nemathes to a meeting with the king's financial advisers at the Royal Bank of Palatia. When they arrived, the bank officials greeted the king with sweaty brows and panicked expressions.

“What’s wrong?” the king asked, his voice echoing around the large, marbled reception area. Desks of tellers and accountants stretched out like boats on a sea.

The chief financial adviser was named Manticor and looked like a log with arms and legs. He bowed, wrung his hands, and replied, “Sire, something terrible has happened.” He gestured for the king to follow him.

They navigated through the desks and around to another room. In it was a large, steel door to a vault. The door stood open, and the small party stepped inside. Michelle noticed right away the sound of some kind of sandy grit under the soles of her shoes.

“Look, Your Highness,” Manticor said and pointed to the shelves. “Our supply of gold was kept on those shelves. But as you can see . . .”

A fine dust sat where there had been gold bars.

“Just like the coins this morning,” Michelle whispered.

Nemathes shot her a disapproving look.

As if Manticor had heard her, he then went to a wall covered with units of small drawers. He began pulling them all out. “We kept coins in these drawers,” he stated. He dropped his hand in one and produced a palm full of dust. “The coins have disappeared as well.”

“What does this mean?” the king asked. “Were you robbed? Has someone replaced your gold with this dirt?”

“No, Your Highness. We have checked and double-checked that possibility. It’s impossible for someone to have broken in, taken all our gold and bullion, and replaced it with this dirt. They would have had to spend hours and hours carting it in by the wagonload. It couldn’t be done.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“I can’t. It’s as if everything has simply dissolved. But it’s worse than that.”

“Oh?”

“We have checked with the other banks. All *their* gold, silver, currency, reserves—*everything*—has turned to dust.”

The king began to pace around the vault, his fists clenched.

“This is a catastrophe of the highest order,” Manticor said in a high, squeaky voice. “Our nation’s wealth has disappeared. How will we buy or sell? How will we trade with other nations?”

King Stefan spun on the man. “Keep your wits, you fool!” he commanded. “Don’t panic!” Then he turned to Nemathes. “Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

Nemathes looked at him blankly. “Sire?”

“Fendar did this. We know he did. Now you have to fix it!”

“I don’t understand, Sire.”

“You mimicked Fendar’s trick with the coins. You turned them to dust. Surely you must be able to undo the damage. Wave a magic wand. Turn this dust back into gold!”

“I can try, Your Highness.”

“Don’t try. You must *succeed*.” With that, the king marched out of the vault, Manticor at his heels like a puppy.

Nemathes grabbed a large pouch of dirt that had held money until this morning. “We’ll take this back to the palace to work on,” he said. “I’ll bring in my best magicians, my alchemists. Together we’ll figure it out.”

“Do you think you can do it?” Michelle asked.

Nemathes shoved his fingers into a pile of dirt and let it filter through. “Perhaps. If you have the power your cousins have, you can help me to reverse what they’ve done.”

Michelle blushed as she felt put on the spot. “But I don’t know how.”

Nemathes suddenly grabbed her arm. “Your value to the king—and to me—is based on your ability to thwart Fendar,” he said, his voice a dark rumble. “If you cannot do that, what use are you?”

Michelle had no answer for him.

Nemathes assembled all of Muirk’s magicians and wizards at his workshop in the palace dungeon. The stone walls dripped with damp, and the floor was cold and wet. Wooden cabinets lined one wall, and several shelves cluttered with books and scrolls lined another. A large cage—almost like a man-sized birdcage—hung from the ceiling.

Michelle shivered as the strange crew, dressed in long, colorful robes adorned with stars and quarter-moons, gathered around various tables, each with some of the dirt that had once been gold. She watched in wonder as they tried numerous spells and incantations. One alchemist poured some of the dirt into beakers and cauldrons and added green and goopy ingredients that made her feel nauseated. Nothing worked. The dirt remained dirt.

Frustrated by their failure, Nemathes forced Michelle to try. But all she could think to do was to put her hands on the dirt and say things like “Abracadabra” and “Presto chango”—to no effect.

Eventually, as the afternoon became evening and everyone seemed bug-eyed from their efforts, Nemathes gave up. He put a hand on Michelle’s shoulder and said ominously, “We’ll talk to the king together.”

Michelle felt nervous at first. But as they ascended from the dark cellars and made their way to the king’s quarters, she began to feel an anger burn deep inside her. This was Danny and Wayne’s fault. They had ditched her back at the fountain, and now they were determined to humiliate her at every turn. They had never liked her. Danny didn’t really mean it when he’d asked her to join them. If he had, Fendar would have waved his walking stick and made the king let her go. Instead, they had left her to deal with their tricks on her own. One way or another, she’d get back at them, she concluded.

The king sat in a chair, his head held wearily in his hands. He looked up as Nemathes and Michelle entered.

“Well?” he asked.

Nemathes cleared his throat, then announced, “I regret to inform Your Highness that—”

Stefan held up his hand to silence Nemathes. “Don’t continue. I know what you’re going to say.”

“My deepest apologies, Sire,” Nemathes said softly.

“I’m sure you did your best, Nemathes,” the king replied with a worn smile. “You have been a good and loyal friend to me all these years. If I speak harshly to you, it is only because of my frustration.”

“I know, Sire.”

Waving them to sit down, the king continued, “I have been all day with my financial advisers, trying to determine how to avert a crisis throughout the country. I believe we’ve come up with a plan, but it will be a difficult and slow process. Already we’ve had riots in some of the townships.” Stefan looked at Michelle. “I have no doubt that my former brother and your cousins are having a laugh at our expense.”

Michelle imagined it: Danny and Wayne were laughing at her until their sides ached. She clenched her teeth and said, “But we won’t let them get away with it, will we? I mean, you’re not going to give in, are you?”

“Of course not,” the king said. “It will take more than this to make me concede to Fendar.”

“Good.”

The king pondered Michelle for a moment, then observed, “You are a determined child.”

Michelle nodded. “My parents say I’m strong-willed.”

“A strong will is what one must have to be a true leader,” Stefan said approvingly. “It’s what separates rulers from their subjects. Remember that, and you will go far in life.”

“What will happen next, Sire?” Nemathes asked, changing the subject back to their immediate problems.

“I will summon Fendar to the palace tomorrow. I want him to know that his tricks have no effect on me.” He suddenly clapped his hands. A servant appeared in the doorway. “Bring me the master of the workmen,” the king commanded. “The Marutians worked hard today, and they will work even harder tomorrow.”



8

A near riot erupted in the Promised Land the next morning. King Stefan's soldiers arrived at sunrise and began corralling men into large wagons. Many of them now carried whips, which they'd never had before, and used them on the backs of Marutian men. Regardless of what their previous jobs had been, the Marutians were taken away to harder assignments. Regmund came straight to the apartment and woke Fendar and the two boys by pounding on the door and shouting at the windows.

"Calm down, Regmund," Fendar said after letting him in. "What new assignments have the men been given?"

"To work in the mines!" Regmund shouted. "The king says he wants our people to find and replenish the supply of gold and silver that *you* turned to dust."

Wondrar, who came in while Regmund was speaking, remarked, "But no one has found gold or silver in Palatia's mines for decades."

"That's the whole point!" Regmund's face turned red as if his head might explode. "The king is punishing us for what you've done! His soldiers are *beating* our men. Now the people are complaining to me about it. What am I supposed to tell them?"

"I have prayed to the Unseen One about this," Fendar replied. "You have to tell the people to be patient. Tell them that as surely as *He* changed the Palatian money to dust, He is going to take them home."

"*If* there are any survivors to take home," Regmund lamented. "The king is going to work us all to death."

In a stern voice, Fendar asked, "Do you still doubt the power of the Unseen One?"

"It's not His power but your use of it that I doubt,"

Regmund stated.

Later, after Regmund left, a young boy came from Wondrar's house with a message. "The king is looking for you," he said breathlessly. "He has sent couriers all over the Promised Land to find you."

"To arrest me?"

"No," the boy explained, "he wants you to come to the palace."

"Maybe he's ready to give in," Danny suggested hopefully.

"Maybe he is," Fendar said, but he looked doubtful.

As they rode in the wagon through the streets of Muirk to the palace, Wayne told Danny, "I can't wait to see Michelle's face. I'll bet it blew her socks off when all their money turned to dust."

Danny didn't answer. He didn't feel as smug about it as Wayne, and he didn't like being on opposite sides from Michelle. Sure, she was a pain in the neck sometimes, but she was still their cousin and belonged with them. Danny also worried that the king might hurt her if he got mad enough at Fendar.

"What will you suggest if the king won't let the Marutians go?" Wayne asked.

Danny shook his head. "I'd better not say. It might mess things up somehow. I'll say what the next sign is when Fendar asks."

Wayne studied his brother for a moment. "You don't really know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"You don't know what the next sign is."

Danny looked away to watch the people on the street. They were crowded onto the sidewalks, hustling to wherever their jobs or responsibilities took them. Danny noticed that almost everyone was dressed in stylish clothes. Some were colorful, while others were simply smart-looking. Top hats bobbed up and down on the men's heads, and the women's dresses billowed bell-like in a kaleidoscopic display.

Wayne nudged him. "You don't know what the signs are, do you?"

"No, I don't," Danny admitted. "But somehow I get an idea. I can't explain it. It's like I get . . . inspired. And somehow, Fendar and Wondrar know it's right when I tell

them. It's strange, but they look at me as if they suddenly had the same idea."

"That's weird," Wayne said.

King Stefan met them in the main reception hall. Many of the members of his court and his advisers were there. Michelle stood nearby, dressed in a robe of purple velvet, but she refused to look at either of the boys' faces. She maintained a stony expression, even when Danny tried to catch her eye. Nemathes stood next to her like a guard.

"Well, Fendar, I hope you are satisfied," the king said.

"Satisfied, Your Highness?"

"Many of your people will leave Muirk for a day in the country, as you requested," Stefan replied.

"To work in the mines, digging for something they won't find," Fendar countered.

The king chuckled. "If you're going to be picky about it . . ."

"You won't set my people free?" Fendar asked.

"Why should I?"

"Because the Unseen One commands it."

"Ah, yes, the Unseen One commands it. The all-powerful Unseen One who caused that minor inconvenience yesterday."

"Taunt me if you must, but beware of what you say about Him," Fendar warned.

"I am the king here!" Stefan suddenly shouted. "Don't you dare tell me what I may or may not say!"

Fendar bowed respectfully. "I won't argue with you. Since you refuse to heed the Unseen One, there is another message from Him."

Again, it was Danny's turn to speak. He began, "The glory of Palatia will—"

"Disappear," the king interrupted. "You said so yesterday."

"You wear your vanity like rich robes," said Wondrar. "But they are rags in the sight of the Unseen One. Watch and know that the Unseen One alone is all-powerful." Wondrar then lifted the walking stick, and a blinding light dazzled them all. When Danny could see clearly again, he gasped—along with everyone else in the room.

The king's clothes, Michelle's robe, the clothes worn by everyone in the court—even the tapestries and curtains that

hung from the walls—all were turned to stained and tattered rags. Only the clothes worn by Fendar, Wondrar, Danny, and Wayne remained as they had been.

Along with the change in clothes, a terrible smell filled the room. People put their hands to their mouths and coughed violently in response.

King Stefan couldn't hide his surprise. "What have you done?" he cried out.

Nemathes quickly stepped forward, his own garment hanging from him in ugly strips. "This is an old spell," he said confidently. He held out his arms, closed his eyes, and muttered to himself. Then he crossed and uncrossed his arms three times in rapid succession. There was another bright flash of light, and everything in the room returned to the way it had been. The clothes, the curtains, and the tapestries were all as good as new. The smell disappeared, too.

Danny was flabbergasted. *Nemathes had reversed the sign!*

"Uh-oh," Wayne said.

Now, for the first time that day, Michelle looked at Danny and Wayne. She smiled that irritating smile of hers. "Ha!" she said.

"Well done, Nemathes!" the king shouted.

Danny looked up at Fendar and Wondrar. Wondrar, he noticed, looked worried. But Fendar was his usual calm self. He didn't speak or do anything. He seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

Undaunted, Nemathes held out his arms, closed his eyes, muttered an incantation, and then crossed and recrossed his arms. Nothing happened. He tried again. Still nothing happened. He tried once more, this time frantically. It didn't work.

The king was trying to speak, but he couldn't because he was coughing too hard.

Only Fendar's clear voice could be heard now. "Set my people free!" he commanded, then turned to leave.

Danny and Wayne followed Fendar and Wondrar out, the sound of coughing ringing in their ears. They had to cup their hands over their noses and mouths to keep the stench away. Danny turned at the door for one last look at Michelle, but she was doubled over, taken by a fit of coughing. He felt bad leaving her behind again.

All the way down the palace halls, Danny could see the

decay in anything made of fabric. The guards were looking themselves over with bewilderment.

The city of Muirk was caught up in chaos as the people ran into the streets. Men and women raced to and fro, as if trying to get somewhere—home, perhaps—to change out of their embarrassing outfits. Others stopped to compare their rags and discuss what had happened. Some stopped and got sick onto the pavement because of the smell.

The Palatian flags that had hung so proudly from the many royal buildings were now tattered and shredded.

When Fendar's group returned to the apartment in the Promised Land, Danny noticed that the clothes of the Marutians—and the curtains and cloth covering the furniture—were all intact. The air was free of the awful smell. The sign didn't seem to affect the Marutians at all.

"Even while it was happening, I wondered what this will accomplish," Wondrar told his brother once they were behind closed doors again.

"It will help to persuade King Stefan to let us go home. Sooner or later, our presence here won't be worth the inconvenience we'll cause. Even now, all of Palatia's fabric and clothes makers will be horrified to find that their best materials have turned into filthy rags. The whole nation is reacting to the terrible stench. Palatia has always been a nation of vain people. Now it has turned against them."



Later that afternoon, King Stefan met with nearly a dozen of his advisers, along with Nemathes and Michelle, in the gardens behind the palace. It was the only place where the smell of rotten cloth didn't overwhelm them.

"Losing our money was bad enough," one of the advisers complained. "But *this*—" He gestured to the rags hanging limp from his body.

The others agreed. "There's no escaping," one silver-haired man said. "At our offices, at home, in the public buildings, it's the same."

"Can't we negotiate with Fendar?" someone asked.

King Stefan looked off to some distant point in the garden. Michelle thought he seemed distracted.

"What does he want?" the silver-haired man asked. "A few days in the woods with the Marutians? If that's all he wants, we should grant it."

"Anything to stop this nonsense," another adviser concurred.

The king regarded them silently for a moment, then asked, "Is this what my advisers suggest? Shall we capitulate to his demands?"

"It isn't capitulation, Sire," the silver-haired man said. "You are merely showing your benevolence to your servants."

The king frowned. "Is that how you'll present it to the public? The king is not giving in out of weakness but out of strength?"

"Yes."

Stefan pondered the idea. Somewhere a bird sang. Michelle watched the king, wondering what he would decide. She wanted to speak but was afraid to in this crowd. Was it her place? Suddenly, the king took the choice out of her hands. He turned to her and asked, "What do *you* think, Michelle?"

Michelle swallowed hard and said, "Me? Well, I think it's the principle of the thing."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's like playing 'chicken.'"

"Chicken?"

"It's a game we play back home. Two people will ride toward each other on their bicycles, and the first one to move out of the way is the chicken—the coward. The idea is to see who'll flinch first. Whoever does is the loser. If you give Fendar what he wants, you'll be the loser."

Nemathes, who had been quiet through the entire meeting, now raised an eyebrow and stated, "I might agree if we were playing a childish game. But we have lost our nation's wealth and now the clothes on our backs. This is not about winning or losing. It's about the survival of our people."

"No," the king suddenly said, his face alight, "Michelle is right. This *is* about winning and losing. I said as much myself to Fendar this morning. If I give in to him, I may as well abdicate as your king. He is strong, but I am stronger."

Michelle felt a deep satisfaction that the king had

agreed with her. This was the way to go, she knew for sure. If Danny and Wayne got the better of her, there'd be no enduring them in the future.

Nemathes began, "But Sire—"

"Nemathes," the king interjected, cutting him off, "I would be more impressed with your advice if you backed it up with power. Where is your magic? Why haven't you been able to counter this mischief of Fendar's?"

"I have tried, Sire," Nemathes replied. "Even now, my magicians are experimenting with various incantations and spells."

"Then I'll be happy to hear from you when you have results."

"Yes, Your Highness," Nemathes said miserably.

The king held out his hand toward Michelle and declared to the entire assembly, "You would all do well to show the courage of this young girl. There is no doubt that she has been sent by the fates to guide me during this time."

Michelle blushed.

The king continued, "We must persevere. Whatever Fendar brings against us, we must stand firm against him." With that, he dismissed them all. Just as Michelle was about to go back into the palace, the king indicated that he wanted her to wait. After everyone had left, including a suspicious Nemathes, the king said, "I think I understand your purpose here."

"You do?"

"You have been sent to be my heart," the king explained softly. "You have an uncommon strength. I shudder to think of how formidable Fendar would be if he had the two boys *and* you on his side. But I see in you my chance to win in this contest of wills."

Michelle curtsied. "Thank you, Your Highness," she said, smiling broadly. Even in smelly rags, she felt like a princess.



"Sire," Fendar greeted, bowing before King Stefan. Wondrar stood next to Fendar regally, his hand resting on the top of the walking stick. It was the next morning, and they were gathered in the reception hall. Danny was astounded to see the entire court still looking like vagabonds, dressed as they were in their rotten rags. Flies buzzed around them.

Wayne nudged Danny and pointed toward Michelle. "Look, she's dressed in her normal clothes again," he whispered.

Sure enough, Michelle had on the pullover shirt, jeans, and sneakers she had worn to Trickle Lake. "She must've put them on because they aren't affected by the latest sign," Danny observed.

"How long will this tiresome game go on?" the king asked, looking less kinglike in his tattered robe.

"Until you allow the Marutians to worship freely," Fendar stated. He clasped his hands in front of him like a father whose patience is wearing thin. "What is your answer?"

"I thought working in the mines was answer enough," Stefan said.

"Then you are still unmoved?" Fendar asked.

"I will not accede to your demands, if that's what you mean. But I have a few demands of my own, including longer work hours. I see now that I've been far too permissive with the Marutians."

Fendar lowered his head. "So be it."

Danny knew, though he wasn't sure how he knew, that it was time for him to speak once more. He stepped forward and said, "The glory of Palatia will fade before your eyes. As a sign of the power of the Unseen One, your beauty will shrivel and itch and burn."

Wondrar then banged the bottom of the walking stick on the ground three times. He turned and walked out. Fendar followed him. Danny and Wayne, never sure when it was actually time to leave, hesitated, then went with the two men.

The king was surprised. “Is that it?” he asked Nemathes, who stood nearby.

Nemathes shrugged. “I don’t know, Sire,” he admitted.

The king leaned back on his throne and scratched at something on his neck. Many of his courtiers and servants were doing the same. It was subtle at first, as each person tried to be discreet, and then the whole room was active with movement. They scratched behind their ears . . . their noses . . . their chests . . . and their arms and legs. Michelle watched them, baffled and amused. She would have laughed if a woman hadn’t suddenly screamed. She was pointing at the man standing next to her. His face was covered with pink and purple blotches. Everyone in the crowd turned to one another as shouts and cries rose up. Something terrible was happening. They scratched and scratched while their skin went painfully red.

“Nemathes, do something!” the king shouted as he dug at his own flesh.

Nemathes stepped forward and, after shouting words Michelle didn’t understand, waved his arms. Whatever he had hoped to accomplish had no effect.

Michelle stepped back toward the wall as people stumbled and fell past her. Most were clawing for the door, hoping to escape somehow. Michelle looked down at her own hands and arms, but no blotches appeared. And apart from feeling itchy out of sympathy for everyone around her, she didn’t suffer from this latest sign. “I must be immune,” she said softly, which was exactly what she had said the night before when she’d discovered that her regular clothes were unaffected.

“Somebody do something!” the king commanded. He had fallen to his knees in front of his throne, scratching at his chest and legs while he rubbed his back against the armrest.



For Wayne, the ride back to the Promised Land was comic. He couldn't help but giggle at the people in the street as they went through wild contortions to deal with their itching. For Danny, though, it was horrifying to watch. He prayed that this time King Stefan would give in. In his heart, though, he knew that it was going to get worse. *A lot* worse.

Danny also worried about Michelle. Was she afflicted with the skin disease, or was she safe?

Wayne seemed to be thinking about the same thing. "I'd love to see Michelle squirming around like that." He chuckled as he jabbed an elbow into Danny's side.

Danny pushed him away. "Grow up, will you?" he chided.

"Hey, what's your problem?" Wayne asked defensively.

"It's not funny," Danny explained. "This is serious business."

Wayne scowled at his brother and then pouted for the rest of the ride.

Regmund and the rest of the elders met their wagon at the gates of the Promised Land. They wanted to have a meeting right away, Regmund said. Fendar agreed.

Danny was prepared to go with them, but Fendar stopped him. He pulled both boys close and whispered, "You don't have to come. This is going to be a long and boring argument, just like the others. They're going to complain about how hard they have to work and how it's all my fault and how they wish I would leave things alone."

"And what are you going to tell them?" Danny asked.

"I'm going to explain that freedom is never free. It must be bought with sacrifice and, sometimes, great pain."

"But what if they don't want freedom?" Danny asked.

"The desire to be free rests deep within the hearts of all men and women. Sometimes, however, that desire is lulled to sleep. It's my job to awaken it again. When all of this is done, the Marutians will remember who they are, and they'll rise up."

"The elders are getting impatient," said Wondrar.

Fendar acknowledged him, and the two of them went off to the assembly room.

"So what do you want to do?" Danny asked Wayne. For the first time since they'd arrived in this strange world, they had time to themselves.

Wayne was still in a sulky mood. “Nothing with *you*,” he said and walked off.

Danny watched him go. He thought about following him to talk about what was wrong. Then he decided it would be better to keep his distance. Something more pressing occupied his mind. He looked around and made his way toward Muirk.

Nemathes called together all the chemists and apothecaries in the city. They brought to the palace their various ointments and creams, and eventually they found a way to soothe the itching and burning. But they couldn’t do anything for the way people looked. The red, pink, and purple blotches covered everyone’s bodies. They were repulsive to the eye. Michelle found herself looking down at the carpet, the paintings on the palace walls, or *anywhere* other than at the faces of the men and women around her.

“He’s gone too far,” an adviser named Penwyth told the king. He was a stately old gentleman who spoke with candor and authority. “If this continues, you will lose the support of the upper classes. We can’t bear to look at one another like this.” The others in the group, mostly men and women of the upper classes Penwyth had mentioned, muttered their agreement.

“What are you advising?” the king asked testily.

“Let the *confounded* man take his *confounded* people out into the *confounded* woods!” Penwyth said. “Once they get this nonsense out of their system, they’ll come back, and we can put things right again.”

The others again murmured their assent.

The king looked at Michelle. She averted her gaze. She still felt the king shouldn’t give in, but she didn’t want to push her luck. To say so in this crowd might get her in trouble. She glanced up, and the king was still looking at her. He wanted to know what she thought. She slowly shook her head.

The king leaned forward in his throne. “So my aristocracy can’t bear the *inconvenience* brought about by

Fendar's antics?" he challenged. "It's too much for them, is it?"

His tone was so thick with sarcasm that no one dared to answer.

"I won't consider it!" he said as he slapped his hand on the throne's armrest. "We are fighting for the rights of all Palatians. If we let this one man walk all over us now, how can we hold our heads up in the future? What will our children say? Will we be remembered as those who overcame the belligerence of the Marutians, or will they spit on our graves as those who caved in to an inferior people? No! I won't entertain the idea of giving Fendar what he wants."

The king dismissed the advisers. As they left, a servant slipped in and whispered something in Nemathes's ear.

Nemathes nodded and then cautiously approached the throne. "Sire, may I have a word with you?" he asked.

"What is it, Nemathes?"

Nemathes leaned close to the king, who listened, then nodded and glanced at Michelle.

"You're looking pale, Michelle," the king said. "I would like you to take a walk in the garden."

Michelle was struck by the suddenness of the king's suggestion. "You want me to take a walk . . . right this minute?"

"It would be good for you."

Michelle then realized what the king wanted. "Oh, I get it. You want to talk to Nemathes alone."

The king smiled. "You are a shrewd child. So, if you don't mind . . ."

Michelle felt a little hurt that she was being left out, but she said, "Yes, Sire. If that's what you want."

"It will serve our purposes well, thank you."

Michelle walked out of the reception hall and down the long corridor that led to the rear of the palace. It seemed empty and hollow to her. The banners and tapestries hung in strips from the walls. Servants passed by with their heads held low and their faces covered. She stepped out through the doors that led onto the large rear porch, then down the long steps to the gardens. It was another bright summer's day. The flowers and trees were untouched by the chaos Fendar had created everywhere else. *Maybe the king was right,* Michelle thought as she took a deep breath. *Maybe I needed a walk*.

The lawn stretched out as far as she could see. Circular designs of pavement and flowers led up to a large fountain. Off to the left and the right were trimmed hedgerows and patches of flowers placed in colorful patterns. Dotted throughout were benches so that people could sit and enjoy the views. She found a bench well away from the palace itself and sat down. A bird sang in a bush nearby. The sound of the splashing fountain caused her mind to wander.

She thought about the events that led up to where she was now. Not so long ago, she was just a kid wandering around a hippie festival at Trickle Lake. Now she was like an adviser to a king—his *guru*. Apart from Nemathes, she might be one of the most powerful people in the whole country!

"Pssst!"

Michelle turned around quickly.

"Over here," came a whisper.

She looked toward a collection of tall bushes that had been designed as a giant maze. A small, wooden sign said the maze was called the King's Labyrinth. Beneath that, it said:

A-*maze* yourself with this royal delight;
Delight yourself with this royal a-*maze*.
Lose yourself with a friend or a foe;
Find your way or ne'er be found.
But don't despair when the hours wane;
Look up! Look up!
The King's Passage will lead you home.

"Here!" came the whisper again. A hand waved at her from the opening to the maze.

Michelle now saw who it was. "Danny!" she cried out.

"Keep your voice down!" he snapped.

Michelle got up from the bench and went over to him. "Are you alone?" she asked. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," he replied.

"What for?"

"I was worried about you. I thought maybe the skin disease might have . . . you know . . . hurt you."

"Your stupid signs don't affect me." Michelle looked around quickly. "You must be crazy to come here without

Fendar. If King Stefan or Nemathes sees you, you'll be locked up."

"Why do you think I hid out here? I was hoping you might decide to take a walk. Otherwise, I was going to sneak into the palace and try to find your room."

"You'd never find it without knowing where it is."

Danny glanced at Michelle nervously. "Michelle, I've got this feeling that everything's going to get a lot worse. You need to come with me. Right now."

"You're kidding."

"No. You're not going to be safe here for very long."

"I'm a lot safer than you are. When King Stefan gets tired of all this fooling around, he's going to come down really hard on Fendar and the whole bunch of you."

"He may try, but he won't succeed. The Unseen One is powerful, Michelle."

Michelle grunted her disbelief.

"I don't understand you," Danny said, taking a different tack. "You're the one who was against everybody in authority. Teachers, politicians, parents—they were all out to oppress us, you said."

"They're out to oppress *me*, I said."

"So what about King Stefan?"

"What about him?"

"He's oppressing people."

Michelle turned her nose up proudly. "He's not oppressing *me*. He asks me what I think. He listens to me."

"Oh, I get it now. He's made you a big shot, and now you're happy to go along with whatever he wants. Is that it?" Danny shook his head woefully. "I'll bet to top it all off, you have a crush on him."

"I do not!" Michelle protested.

"Then what about all those things you made such a big deal about? You talked my ear off about freedom and rights. What about the freedom and rights of the Marutians?"

Michelle gazed at Danny as if he'd asked a stupid question. "They have plenty of freedom and all kinds of rights. King Stefan tells me that even the wealthiest people of other countries don't have it as good as the Marutians do here. Until Fendar came along, they worked at jobs that suited them and lived in nice homes."

"But they're still *slaves*. No matter how good Stefan

makes it for them, they're slaves. They're not free, and they don't have any rights. They can't even go out into the woods to worship the Unseen One."

"As I understand it, none of them really want to go out to worship the Unseen One. It's Fendar who's trying to make them do it."

"That's because King Stefan keeps confusing them."

"Or maybe Fendar is the one who's confusing everybody."

"Fendar is the only one who knows what's going on. He's in touch with the Unseen One. He's going to wake the Marutians up to who they really are, and he's going to free them from Stefan. Nothing will stop him."

"Ha!"

"Listen to me, Michelle. *Please*. The Unseen One brought us here from our world. But He brought us over to help Fendar, not the king. Come with me now, and maybe when this is all over, we can go home again. Don't you want to go home?"

"Not especially. I like it here."

Danny growled. "You're just like the Marutians! King Stefan has duped you."

"You're the one who's duped, Danny," Michelle said with a snooty tone. "After the king defeats Fendar, you and Wayne are going to be left out in the cold. You might get locked up as traitors. Then what're you going to do? I may not be able to help you then. But if you come into the palace now and tell the king you'll help him . . ."

"No. We don't belong here."

"I know what your problem really is," Michelle said. "You just don't like it that a girl is more powerful than you. You're such a chauvinist."

"And you're pathetic," Danny said.

Just then, they heard a rustling around the hedges, out of sight. Danny turned to look and saw two guards appear. "Uh-oh," he said. He spun to run in the other direction, but two guards were rounding that corner, too.

"Get him!" one of the guards shouted.

With nowhere left to run, Danny retreated into the maze.

"What's going on here?" Michelle shouted at the guards as they raced in after Danny. "Leave him alone!"

From behind her, Nemathes said, “Well done, Michelle. The king will be very proud of you if we catch him.”

“You knew he was here,” Michelle said, suddenly realizing why the king had insisted she take a walk. “Someone saw Danny in the gardens, and that’s why you sent me out.”

“You are a clever girl.” Nemathes smiled, his face puffed and swollen from the blotches. He patted her on the shoulder.

Michelle moved away from him. She didn’t like to be tricked. And even though she thought Danny was wrong, she didn’t want him caught and put in jail.

With the guards hot on his tail, Danny ran up and down the various rows, around corners, into dead ends, and back out again without knowing where he was going or if he was even going in the right direction. Occasionally a guard shouted to another guard, which helped Danny more than it helped them. He soon realized that they didn’t know the maze any better than he did. He tried to cut through the hedges, but they were thick, with pinlike needles on their branches. He tried to climb up and over one hedge, but the branches buckled under his weight, the needles stabbing into him.

“Get out of there!” Nemathes finally shouted irritably at the guards. “We’ll surround the maze and catch him when he comes out. Now hurry up and go for reinforcements!”

Danny froze where he was, all hope disappearing fast. If he was going to escape, he had to do it before the reinforcements arrived. He could hear the guards in other parts of the maze, and it sounded as if they couldn’t find their way out.

“How do we get out of here?” one of the guards yelled.

“You baboons!” Nemathes yelled back. “If I tell you, *he’ll* hear. Just think of the *sign*!”

“Sign?” the guard asked. “What sign?”

Nemathes growled loudly in exasperation.

The sign? Danny wondered. At first he thought of Fendar’s signs, but he knew that wasn’t what Nemathes was talking about. Then he remembered the wooden sign at the front of the maze. What did it say? Danny had read it when he’d first arrived, but now he was hard-pressed to bring it to mind. Something about delight and a-*maze* and getting lost and friends and foes and . . . and . . .

King’s Passage? That was it. It had said that if you were

in despair, then do something about the King's Passage. But what was he supposed to do? Danny closed his eyes, trying to picture the sign. What did it say about the King's Passage?

Look up!

Danny looked up at the clear, blue sky. What was he supposed to see? He lowered his eyes until they rested on the tops of the hedges. He still didn't see anything. He allowed his gaze to follow the line of the solid row of hedges on his left, down to the end of the aisle. Then he noticed the top of the last bush wasn't flat but curved. He studied it, trying to make out the significance of the difference. Suddenly it came to him: That bush was sculpted to look like the top of a king's crown! He ran to it and had the choice of going left or right. To the left was a regular flat bush, and to the right was another curved bush. He raced in that direction. At every intersection or possible turning, one bush indicated which way to go.

More than once, Danny found himself only a hedge away from one of the guards. He could hear the guard on the other side of the greenery, sometimes kicking the dirt in anger, sometimes cursing.

After a few minutes, Danny reached an opening that led out of the maze. He approached it slowly, sure that Nemathes or a guard would be waiting for him. To his surprise, he'd come back to the entrance of the maze, not the exit. No one was there. They'd probably gone to the exit to wait for him.

Danny ran to the left. The guards still shouted from inside the maze, and he could hear Nemathes farther off. *Where's Michelle?* he wondered. He retraced his steps from how he'd originally come into the gardens, following the outside of the maze around to the north. He sprinted across to a thick forest to the west. That would lead to the tree with the long branch over the palace wall and Muirk beyond.

He was back in the Promised Land by the time the sun went down.

"Where have you been?" Fendar asked angrily when Danny returned to the apartment.

Danny stammered for a moment, aware of the trouble he'd be in if Fendar knew he'd gone back to the palace. He was tempted to tell a half-truth like "I took a walk," but he knew better. "I went to the palace to see Michelle," he finally admitted.

Fendar glared at him. “Have we come this far for you to jeopardize your life—or the Unseen One’s purposes?” he demanded.

“No, sir.”

Wayne stood nearby with a pleased expression on his face.

“Then what were you thinking?”

“I was worried about Michelle,” Danny confessed. “I wanted to try and talk her into coming back here with us.”

“That was stupid,” Wayne said.

“Yes, it was,” Fendar agreed.

Wayne’s smile grew bigger.

“Stupid,” Fendar repeated, though now his tone softened. “But understandable.”

Wayne’s face fell. Danny looked up at Fendar, astonished.

Fendar’s eyes were filled with sadness. “You still don’t seem to grasp that Michelle is fulfilling her role as she should. She is accomplishing the Unseen One’s bidding.”

“But she’s on the *wrong side*, and she thinks she’s *right*,” Danny said. “It’s like she’s gone power-crazy. She thinks she’s one of the king’s advisers. I’ll bet she’s even telling him not to listen to you.”

“Then she is working within the will of the Unseen One.”

“But I don’t think she knows she’s working within His will. She’s doing it because it’s the way she is,” Danny said, then stopped to think if what he’d just said made any sense.

Fendar understood what he meant in any case, because he replied, “The Unseen One often uses our own wrongheaded inclinations to accomplish His purposes.”

“Do you mean the Unseen One *wants* her to work against us—and for the king to refuse to do what you want?”

“Perhaps. We may not know until we reach the end. But I promise you this: The Unseen One will not be thwarted. One way or the other, He’ll do what He wants.” Fendar paused to give Danny a chance to ask any more questions. Danny didn’t know what to say. Fendar slapped his hands together. “Let’s see about dinner.”

The meal was a joyless affair. Though Fendar did his best to keep the mood light, Danny was lost in his thoughts about Michelle, and Wayne was pouting again.

That night as they were going to sleep, Wayne finally broke his cold silence and told Danny, “I know how Michelle feels. I’d probably do the same thing she’s doing if I were in her shoes.”

Danny sat up on his elbows and looked at his brother’s shadow in the darkness. “You would?”

Wayne was quiet for such a long time that Danny thought he’d fallen asleep. But then Wayne continued, “You’re the oldest, so you can’t understand what it’s like. But for Michelle and me, it’s tough. We have to sit back and watch while you older kids get to do all the fun and important stuff. So it means a lot when someone treats us special.”

“I don’t get to do all the fun and important stuff,” Danny argued.

Wayne clucked his tongue. Danny imagined he’d rolled his eyes, too. “I told you you couldn’t understand.”

Danny lay back again and sighed. “Okay. Maybe we do sometimes. But we also have to do things we *don’t* like. Mom and Dad, not to mention teachers—they always give me more responsibility than they give you. And they always say it’s because I’m the oldest.”

“Yeah, but it’s still not fair,” Wayne complained. “I’m supposed to be one of the three children everyone is talking about, but I haven’t been allowed to do anything. When will I get my turn?”

Danny thought about it a moment, then said, “Probably when you least expect it.”



Their days now followed a routine. Danny and Wayne would get up, have breakfast with Fendar, and be joined by Wondrar; then the four of them would ride in a wagon to the palace. The guards, who had never been friendly to them anyway, would grunt and wave them on. A servant would then lead them to wherever the king was holding audience. After the audience with the king, Fendar would meet with some of the Marutians to discuss their plight. He would then sneak away to be alone. Danny got the impression he went off to pray, sometimes for hours.

This morning, the king was in a particularly foul mood. Little wonder, since his clothes were falling off his back and his skin was covered with sores. But he remained fiercely stubborn and greeted the four with a terse "No."

"No, Sire?" Fendar inquired.

"Allowing the Marutians to leave Muirk is out of the question. How many times do I have to say it?"

"As you wish," Fendar answered, then waved Danny forward.

"The glory of Palatia will fade before your very eyes," he began.

"Like you did yesterday," the king interjected. "You disappeared before the eyes of my guards."

Danny cleared his throat and continued, "Money, fashion, and beauty are gone. Now watch what happens to your great industries."

Wondrar took the walking stick and casually strolled over to one of the thick pieces of timber that made up the wall of the reception hall. He tapped the stick against it and then returned to Fendar's side.

"Know that the Unseen One is powerful throughout the

land of Palatia," Fendar said.

Everyone watched and waited to see what Wondrar's simple action would mean. The king, whose hands had been grasping the armrests of his throne, suddenly lifted them up. "What is this?" he gasped as he stared at the wood on the armrests.

Nemathes came quickly to his side. "Sire?" he asked.

"The wood is rotting!" the king said, unable to take his eyes off his throne.

"Throughout your kingdom," Fendar announced, "the great Palatian trees, on which the renowned Palatian lumber trade depends, will rot."

The palace began to creak like an old ship as the wood started to fulfill Fendar's statement. The timber around them turned from brown to an ashen gray. The court buzzed; then the members moved to the doors, fearful that the roof might cave in. Nemathes leaned toward the king and whispered in his ear.

Danny looked for Michelle. She stood off to the side of the room. She hadn't moved and wouldn't look at him. Her expression, Danny thought, was pensive. Danny was disappointed. He'd hoped that because she'd helped him at the maze yesterday, she might have had a change of heart.

Fendar indicated it was time to go. The two men turned, with Danny and Wayne ready to follow, when the king suddenly shouted at them to stop.

That brought the chaos in the room to a standstill.

The king nodded to Nemathes, who crossed the room to Fendar. "Fendar, you acted before the king had a chance to finish his statement," he said silkily.

"Oh?" Fendar said in obvious surprise.

"While it is not possible for your Marutians to leave Muirk to worship the Unseen One, there is another way."

Fendar waited for Nemathes to continue.

"The king would like to declare a national day of worship for everyone in Palatia. He will grant the Marutians complete freedom to have a feast in their district, with the assistance of the king himself, to worship the Unseen One here in Muirk."

This seemed like a reasonable counteroffer, Danny thought, and he wondered if Fendar would accept it.

Fendar looked past Nemathes and spoke to the king

directly. “Sire, your offer seems kind,” he stated diplomatically. “But it is like asking locked-up prisoners to celebrate their freedom without leaving their jail cells. You must let my people go free from Muirk to worship according to the Unseen One’s commands.”

King Stefan’s face, purple and blotchy as it was, went a deep crimson. He stood stiff as a board, as if holding his breath and counting to 10 to control his anger. Then he turned away from them all. Michelle stepped forward anxiously. It looked to Danny as if she wanted to say something but didn’t dare. Then, without facing them, the king said, “All right. Go where you want. Just put an end to these curses.”

The members of the court gasped in surprise. Nemathes’s eyes grew wide. Danny wanted to shout. Wayne even started to leap up, but Danny put a restraining hand on his brother’s arm. Success at last!

Fendar and Wondrar exchanged glances. Neither of them looked satisfied or jubilant. In fact, they looked downright worried, Danny thought.

Fendar stepped forward and bowed. “What did Your Highness say?” he asked.

The king spun on his heel and repeated through clenched teeth, “Your Marutians may go out to worship for a few days. End your curses now.”

Fendar, with no sign of relief, responded, “As you wish.”

Wondrar held up the walking stick and then brought it down hard on the floor. It crashed with a thunderous sound, and a blinding light made them all shield their eyes. After a moment, the light subsided, and Danny, blinking, looked around.

Everyone’s skin had returned to normal. Everyone’s clothes had changed from rags to the rich-colored fabrics they had been before. The crests and banners hung proudly once again. The timber was brown and firm. The king slumped down in his throne, now rot-free and sturdy again, and stared out a nearby window. He then moved his hand in a gesture so subtle that it was hard to see he’d even done it.

Nemathes saw it, however, and immediately clapped his hands loudly. “The king wishes to be alone. You are dismissed!” he ordered.

Danny had no doubt that the king felt humiliated. Everyone left the reception hall in silence. Once again, Danny tried to catch Michelle's eye, but she was frozen in place and wouldn't look at him. Danny figured she felt humiliated too.

Once the reception hall was clear, Nemathes closed the doors. He moved warily to the king. "You surprised me, Sire," he said. "When I suggested that you give a counteroffer, I had no idea . . . "

"What choice did I have?" the king answered peevishly.

"None, of course," Nemathes replied.

Stefan looked at Michelle, but she kept her gaze down. "You don't agree," he guessed.

"I'm not allowed to argue with you," Michelle said evasively. "You're the king."

"Don't you forget it," Stefan said sternly. "And as the king, I must think of the welfare of my people before my own pride. You are a child and cannot possibly understand."

"I understand that you gave in."

The king sat up and poked a finger in her direction. "Not that I ever have to explain myself, but I want you to be educated in the ways of leadership. Because Fendar cursed our money, we have been relying on our lumber trade as a means of barter with the other nations. To lose that would ruin us financially. We would be a bankrupt nation."

"So Fendar has won."

"He hasn't won," the king said, a sly smile forming on his lips. "I said they could go. But I didn't say *when* they could go."

Nemathes was instantly concerned. "Sire, you don't mean to renege on your promise," he said anxiously.

The king shook his head, but the smile stayed. "I will not renege. I will simply *postpone*."

Michelle giggled and wondered what Danny would say to that.



Fendar and Wondrar met with the Marutian elders to discuss how to get the thousands of people out of the city without a

lot of confusion and chaos. Now that freedom from Muirk was a distinct possibility, even for a few days, the elders were hopeful.

A feeling of celebration seemed to move throughout the Promised Land. Danny noticed that the people on the street were smiling more. Even those Marutians who had been beaten and sent out to the mines and fields for more than 12 hours that day reacted happily to the news.

Privately, Fendar told Danny, “Once they have a taste of freedom, they’ll want more. These days out will stir them. You watch and see.”

That evening, Fendar and Wondrar continued to discuss plans for evacuating the Marutians. They pored over maps and debated routes and bickered over details like the two brothers they were. Danny and Wayne, who learned to play a Marutian board game involving cards and pegs, watched them with amusement.

“Does this mean we’re going back home?” Wayne asked while Danny drew a card and then moved a peg three squares on the board.

“I don’t know,” Danny replied. “If this is what we came to do, I guess we can go home.”

“But I haven’t done my part,” Wayne said. “Remember? One of us is supposed to raise a cloud or something like that.”

“Maybe you’ll do it when we all go out to the forest.”

“I think they’re smoke signals,” Wayne said as he took his turn at the game.

“What?”

“Like Indians,” he explained. “I’ll bet there’ll be a big bonfire in the forest, and I’ll be in charge of sending smoke signals.”

Danny rolled his eyes. “You’re goofy.”

“What other kind of cloud goes up?” he asked.

Just then they heard a knock at the door, and Wondrar answered it. Jakin, the leader of the small band of Marutian rebels, came in. His face was overcast with bad news.

“What’s wrong?” Fendar asked immediately.

“My spies at the palace have brought me some disturbing news,” Jakin reported. He sat down at the table and poured himself a drink of water. After he drank it, he said, “Everyone at court is laughing at us.”

Fendar sat down next to him. “Why are they laughing?”

“Because the word has gone around that the king has no intention of allowing us to leave.”

“He gave his word that we could.”

“But he didn’t say *when* we could. My spies tell me that he will wait until the idea of leaving is forgotten or—” Jakin paused for a moment.

“Or?”

“Or until the time is right to arrest you and try you for murder.”

Fendar’s cheeks turned red. He clenched his hand into a fist and brought it down on the table. Cups and bowls rattled, and crumbs of bread scattered. But he said nothing.

“Does anyone else know about this?” Wondrar asked.

Jakin shook his head, but his face was bright. “I came to you first. This is just the sort of thing my rebels need to get the people motivated. When they catch the king in a bold-faced lie—”

“Or this news will deflate the people’s hopes,” Wondrar said with a frown. “The people will play into the king’s hands and forget about freedom.” He looked at his brother. “And if he continues to work them as hard as he has, you will be seen as their true enemy. They won’t fight for freedom but instead will happily hand you over for execution.”

“Do you think so poorly of our kinsmen?” Jakin asked as a rebuke of Wondrar.

“Yes, I do. We are a fickle lot. We have exchanged our freedom for comfort and security. We have ignored the Unseen One. We have sold our souls to the Palatians.”

Fendar suddenly stood up and exclaimed, “Then we will not play the king’s waiting game. I will put it to him *tonight* to say when we may go. If he evades the question, he will have to answer to the Unseen One.”



Michelle was enjoying the evening with King Stefan, his wife, Chardan; and their two sons, Penthan and Rathan. Michelle hadn’t even realized that King Stefan was married until he invited her to dinner in the royal apartments. Nemathes

explained that Stefan kept his family away from the politics of the land. Except for state occasions when the entire family had to be present, they lived privately and secluded from royal demands. Nemathes said, “When the time comes, King Stefan will train his firstborn son for his role as the future king. But right now, the boy is only five. The king wants him to enjoy his childhood while he can.”

Dinner was a lavish affair held in the king’s private dining room. Though he said it was an informal occasion, he made sure his servants were dressed to the hilt and served a six-course meal that included various kinds of meats, fruits, vegetables, and sweet puddings at the end. Chardan, who refused to be called a queen, chatted amiably with Michelle, asking all kinds of questions about where she was from. She was a kind woman with a round, friendly face and curly, brown hair that she tied up in a bun.

Penthan and Rathan, who favored their father’s looks, sat quietly and politely during the meal. Afterward, they made up for lost time by exhausting Michelle with stories and games.

Michelle was overwhelmed with feelings she hadn’t experienced in a long time. She was part of a family. Her parents had divorced a long time ago, and, apart from being shuttled back and forth between them, the only other family she had was when she visited Danny and Wayne. She never enjoyed that much, mostly because she was jealous of their life together. But tonight, here in Muirk with the king and queen and the two young princes, she felt like a member of their family. The king listened to her. The queen was interested in what she had to say. The young boys liked her. She had a special place here, a place she didn’t have with her busy mother or her remarried father. She *belonged*.

Late in the evening. when Michelle began to think it was time to go back to her room, Nemathes came to the door. He spoke quietly to the king and then left. Stefan apologized to his wife and asked Michelle to come with him.

“Is something wrong?” Michelle asked as they left the apartments and walked down the hallway to the front of the palace.

“Our friends have returned,” Stefan said.

“So late?”

The king snorted. “Marutians are not known for their

manners. Normally I wouldn't meet anyone at this hour, but Nemathes advises that I should. And, as you know, I do everything Nemathes tells me to do."

The king and Michelle laughed together as they entered the reception hall. Fendar, Wondrar, Danny, and Wayne stood in the center of the room. Michelle searched their faces to see what they might be up to, but she couldn't detect anything in their solemn expressions.

"Consider yourselves honored," the king said as he took his throne. "Now, what's so important that I interrupted my time with my family and a guest to meet with you?"

"A question of integrity," Fendar announced. His voice was low and full of anger.

"Whose integrity?"

"Yours."

The king looked at Nemathes. "Is this fugitive questioning the integrity of the king?" he asked.

"It sounds as if he is," Nemathes replied.

Fendar feigned politeness. "I'm certain that it is a misunderstanding on my part. Your Highness said earlier today that the Marutians could go out of Muirk to worship the Unseen One. May I ask *when* we may go?"

"I'll let you know," the king said casually.

"It would be best for all if you said so *now*." Fendar's eyes seemed to burn into the king. "There are so many plans to be made, you see."

The king considered Fendar, then said, "At an appropriate time."

"When?" Fendar asked more firmly.

Sitting up in his throne, Stefan lost the casual tone in his voice. "When I say so."

"You're toying with us."

"I am your king. You don't dare accuse me of anything," Stefan hissed.

"Ah, but I *do* accuse you, Sire. You have no intention of allowing us to leave Muirk—not now, not later."

The king stood up. "I should have locked you up the first moment you set foot in Muirk!"

"You have no authority over me," Fendar said, his voice a low growl. "Danny."

As Danny stepped forward, the king said derisively, "The glory of Palatia will fade before my very eyes. Yes, yes,

I've heard it before."

Danny blushed slightly, then stammered, "Eat as much as you can tonight. Tomorrow your plates will be empty."

Wondrar took the walking stick with both hands and moved it in a large circle. Then he walked out.

Fendar remained long enough to add, "The choice was yours from the beginning. You could have acknowledged the Unseen One. But your stubbornness has made you blind, and Palatia will now suffer as it has never suffered before." Fendar then left with Danny and Wayne trailing behind.

"What can he do to us?" Stefan asked Nemathes. "There must be a limit to their power."

"Perhaps," a pale and worried Nemathes answered. "And perhaps their limits are beyond our endurance."

"Is anything beyond my endurance?" King Stefan gibed his adviser.

"We shall see," Nemathes responded.

Michelle thought she'd never heard a voice so full of gloom.



That night, while the Palatians slept, a white mist drifted through their fields of wheat and corn, their gardens of vegetables, and their orchards. As the mist passed, the plants and trees withered and died.

In other fields and pastures, cattle and sheep, chickens and pigs all stirred restlessly as if they sensed the coming catastrophe. Then each in its turn breathed its last breath and collapsed where it was. By morning, the corpses were rotten and inedible.

Unable to sleep, Michelle stood at her bedroom window and saw the moving mist without knowing what it meant. Her mind was already pondering the day ahead. *The king has to stay firm,* she thought. *If he gives in to Fendar, I'll have to go back to face Danny and Wayne. Then we would probably go back to our own world. And right now, that's the last place I want to be.*



The next day, King Stefan's soldiers raided the Promised Land. The crops and animals there hadn't died the night before, and the soldiers thought they could take the food into Muirk. But the instant their wagons reached the gate, the crops withered and the animals died. In retaliation, Marutian workers were taken to the fields of dead crops and animals and forced to burn or bury them.

Regmund and the elders cornered Fendar and Wondrar at the apartment. "King Stefan wants our men to work until they drop!" Regmund complained. "Our people are beaten without reason."

"So they are finally being treated as the slaves they truly are," Fendar observed. "Maybe now they will long for their true home in Marus."

One of the other elders said accusingly, "That's easy for you to say! You don't feel the lash of the whip on your back! You haven't been clubbed until you were half dead!"

"Perhaps you'd be happier if I turned myself over to the king and allowed him to execute me?" Fendar challenged them. "Is that what you want—to go back to how things have been? Do you care so little for the Unseen One and His desire for you?"

"We didn't expect this kind of trouble," Regmund admitted.

"The Unseen One has spared you from all the pain He has poured out on the Palatians. Yet He is still too much trouble for you?"

Regmund shuffled uneasily. "What good does it do us if the king won't let us go?"

"He *will* let us go," Fendar said firmly. "But it may take time. Watch and see the wonders the Unseen One will

perform."

Fendar, Wondrar, Danny, and Wayne went directly to the palace. This time Nemathes met them at the gate. Danny wondered what had become of Michelle.

"The king will not see you today," announced Nemathes. Danny thought the king's magician looked older somehow.

"Then his heart is still unmoved?" Fendar confirmed.

"It is."

Fendar sighed deeply and gestured to Danny.

"The glory of Palatia will fade before your eyes," he said.

With both hands, Wondrar held the walking stick up over his head. "Palatia's great warships, the envy of the world, will disappear. Tell your king that the Unseen One is far greater."

"With a wave of your stick, you think you can obliterate the might of the Palatian navy?" Nemathes seemed to ask more out of curiosity than disbelief.

"Until the king relents, you will see this—and much worse," Fendar replied.



King Stefan's meeting with his military advisers had turned into a shouting match. Michelle watched silently from her chair near the door. Only when the king brought his fist down onto the table did the assembly quiet enough to hear him.

"I never expected to see my generals and admirals in such a childish panic," the king said scornfully. "Speak to me, Admiral Altec."

"The entire fleet has sunk, Your Highness," reported a stiff-gated man in a deep blue coat with epaulets on the shoulders. "We were fortunate to rescue all of the ships' crews, with only a handful of minor injuries."

"How did it happen?" the king asked.

"The hulls on the ships simply fractured and burst. The ships sank faster than anything our most experienced commanders have ever seen."

"Was it sabotage?"

"Sabotage!" the admiral cried out. "Sire, these doings are not manmade. They are of supernatural origin. Surely you must know that! Even in the coastal towns, we know of Fendar and his powers."

"Then we have our work cut out for us. We must rebuild the fleet."

The admiral shook his head and said mournfully, "It will take months, years! And in the meantime, we are laid open to our enemies along the seafront."

"We are laid open to worse things than that if I give in to Fendar!" the king snapped.

One of the generals stood up. "Worse, Sire?" he asked. "What could be worse than this?"

The king leveled a harsh gaze at him. "You have lived too long in leisure—you have become soft—if you think it cannot be worse. Consider our enemies attacking us from all sides. That is what they will surely do if I allow Fendar and his Marutians to leave. This is a battle of endurance. If we lose to Fendar, what message does that send to the other kings? They will consider me a weak monarch, one who will be easily conquered. We'll have no end of attacks after that. So be strong, be resolved! We *must* win against Fendar."

"How will you win against him?" the admiral inquired. "His powers seem to protect him. And your wizards are useless," he added sarcastically, gesturing to Nemathes.

Michelle looked over at Nemathes, who, admittedly, looked pale and tired. She imagined that he was staying up nights trying to find a way to fight Fendar with magic.

King Stefan rose to his full height and said, "I will come down on the Marutians with an iron fist!" To accent the point, he brought his own fist down on the table.

This worried Michelle. She imagined that he would begin to hurt the Marutians, which didn't fit into the game she had in mind. After the assembly had been dismissed, she asked the king what he meant by his words.

"I will work them harder, that's all," he assured her. "Unlike Fendar, I am not a killer."

But Michelle couldn't see what Danny and Wayne witnessed firsthand. The king's army was given free rein to do what it liked with the people of Marus. At first the soldiers simply beat and abused the workers. Then they marched through the streets of the Promised Land and lashed out at anyone who got in their way.

"It's a show of power," Wondrar said as they watched from the apartment window.

Jakin and a small group of rebels skirmished with some of the soldiers in the back streets, but they were driven off with muskets and swords.

"Are we going to stand by and let this happen?" Wondrar asked his brother.

"We must follow the plan laid out for us by the Unseen One," Fendar replied. "We will go to the king again and give him the chance to change his mind."

So the four of them returned to the palace that evening. Nemathes greeted them at the gate once again—before they even got out of the wagon—with a message from the king. "His Highness doesn't want to be interrupted," he informed them. "He is having supper with his family and Michelle, his ward."

"His *ward*?*"* Wayne asked. "Does that mean she's like a princess or something?"

"Or something," Nemathes replied dryly.

Fendar was adamant. "I believe he'll want to see us now. Otherwise he'll regret the consequences."

"Your threats are lost on him," Nemathes said.

"Then please pass on a message from us."

Nemathes watched impatiently, with his arms folded, while Danny said, "The glory of Palatia will fade before your eyes."

"Be warned tonight that by the power of the Unseen One, tomorrow will bring destruction," added Fendar. "The great buildings of Palatia—the palaces, temples, arenas, and museums—will all crumble. Even Muirkostle will fall. Evacuate everyone, or lives will be lost."

Nemathes, who had looked pale before, now went completely white. "I . . . will inform His Highness," he stammered.

Fendar stepped closer to Nemathes. "In case he is tempted to think this is an idle threat," Fendar warned, "tell

him to travel to the mausoleum in the royal park. There he will receive a foretaste of what will come unless he changes his mind."

Nemathes bowed. "I will tell him."

Nemathes watched as Wondrar turned the wagon around and drove it back onto the boulevard in front of the palace. It disappeared from his view. Gathering his robe up, he raced back to the palace and straight to the king's private chambers.

The king was having his evening meal with his family and Michelle. He looked annoyed to have been interrupted until Nemathes explained what Fendar had said.

Losing no time, the king called for his royal carriage to be brought to the front of the palace. He wanted to see for himself what had happened to his family's mausoleum. Michelle, who was disappointed to have their family time undone by bad news, went with the king and Nemathes.

The royal park was dark except for an occasional street lamp that lit the main drive to and around the lake. Michelle hadn't been to this park before, so she didn't know what to expect. To her, the black patches of trees and the reflection of the night sky shimmering on the lake made it look like any other park she'd seen—except for the two moons, of course.

The king suddenly gasped "No!" and pounded on the roof of the carriage for the driver to stop. The horses snorted and the carriage lurched as the king leaped out the door. Nemathes was right behind him. Confused, Michelle followed.

A path led up to broad, stone steps. At the top of the steps was a mound of rubble, as if an earthquake had shaken down whatever building was there. Michelle could barely make out the arches and pillars that lay haphazardly on the heap.

The king stood at the bottom of the steps, his face a rigid mask of fury. Nemathes watched his sovereign carefully, unsure what might happen next.

"My parents are in there," the king finally said, a quiver in his voice. "How does he dare such profanity? I curse the day he was born!"

"Sire, he swears that all the great buildings of Palatia will fall, exactly like this one," Nemathes reminded him.

The king was silent for a moment, then slowly sat down on the step. "We cannot let him," he said simply.

"How will we stop him?"

"How else? We must let the Marutians go."

"Does Your Highness mean it this time? They will not tolerate any tricks."

"I have just said so, haven't I?" Stefan said angrily. He looked up at Michelle, who stood by without knowing what to say. "You are disappointed in me, I know. But unless you give me power like Fendar's or wisdom I cannot find for myself, I must concede. I can't bear to sit idly by and watch the destruction of our city."

Michelle shook her head. "I'm sorry, Sire."

"We must inform them immediately. This curse will come before morning otherwise."

The king stood up. "Take the carriage to their district and tell them of my decision," he ordered Nemathes. "But tell them also that I want them to leave in the morning. Not the day after or the next week or the next month. If they want time to go into the wilderness to worship, let them go immediately. Go—and take their curses with them!"

"How will you return to the palace?" Nemathes asked.

"My ward and I will walk."

With a quick bow, Nemathes strode off to the carriage. A moment later, the driver shouted at the horses and the carriage rattled off.

King Stefan and Michelle began their walk back to the palace. Michelle had thought that the king wanted to talk to her, but he didn't say a word. He seemed lost in his thoughts. Michelle decided it was probably just as well. She didn't have anything encouraging to offer. In fact, if she spoke, she would have told him that he had done the right thing. As much as she hated to admit it—and she knew she couldn't bear to face Danny and Wayne after this—Fendar had them beaten.

It took them nearly half an hour to get back to the palace. Michelle wasn't sure what time it was now, but it seemed late. She felt tired from the walk. As they entered through the front doors, Chardan approached with the two princes. The boys rushed to their father's arms.

"They refused to go to bed until they knew you were all right," Chardan explained. "Somehow they got the idea that if the family mausoleum fell, our whole family would collapse."

Stefan knelt down, pulled his sons onto his knees, and said softly, "No, my sons. You are safe."

"Did you make the bad man go away?" Penthan asked.

The king looked at him somberly. "The bad man will leave us alone now, I think."

"You are giving Fendar what he wants?" Chardan asked, surprised.

"Yes. The Marutians can go worship their god for a few days."

"Oh." Chardan's tone caused Michelle to look up at her. Her face betrayed her disappointment.

Stefan noted it, too, and pondered her quizzically. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No," Chardan said, but obviously something *was* wrong. "It's only that I've been telling your sons how you are the king and would never give in to the demands of mere slaves."

Stefan's cheeks turned red. "I am not giving in," he countered. "I am merely making a small concession."

"If you say so." Chardan beckoned the children to come to her.

"Chardan!"

She looked at her husband uncomfortably. "We shouldn't talk about this in front of the children or our guest."

"We can certainly talk about it now," the king said angrily, standing up fully again. "What do you mean?"

"Must I spell it out? You have been defeated by your former brother, and now I must think of a way to explain it so they'll understand." She turned to the two boys, who watched their parents with confused expressions, and said, "Come to bed now." Then she led them down the hall and back to their chambers.

"Do you agree with her?" Stefan asked Michelle.

"You've done the smart thing," Michelle said. "You had to give in to Fendar, or everything would've fallen down."

"You use the same phrase—'give in.' So that's how you see it too. Fendar, has defeated me."

Michelle stammered, "He hasn't *defeated* you. You wouldn't still be king if he defeated you. It's like you said. You made a concession."

"Words," he growled. "Meaningless words. I'm sick of them." As he stormed off, he shouted like a little boy, "I'll show you! I'll show all of you!"

Uh-oh, Michelle thought. *I didn't handle that well at all.*



As the sun came up, Danny and Wayne stood out in the chilly morning air, watching with amazement as wagons were loaded quickly for the trip out of Muirk. Ever since Nemathes had come the night before to deliver the news, the Marutians had been abuzz with excitement. For many, it would be the first time they'd ever left the confines of Muirk. Candles and lamps had burned all night as food was made and provisions were assembled. Thousands of men, women, and children worked like bees to get packed. Fendar and Wondrar coordinated with Regmund and the elders to make their departure as quick and smooth as possible. Danny knew that, in the backs of their minds, they half expected the king to double-cross them again.

Shortly after the sun had cleared the horizon, Danny stood with Wayne, Fendar, and Wondrar at the gate separating the Promised Land from Muirk. They were only moments from the mass exodus into the country. Once again, Danny wondered what this meant for him, Wayne, and Michelle. Would they be able to go home now?

An odd sound distracted Danny from the final efforts to leave. It reminded him of a crackling fire, but it was far too loud for that. Then he realized it was the sound of marching feet—hundreds of marching feet. Danny stood up on a wagon and looked from the gate in the direction of the city center. Through the scattered buildings and trees, he could see a long line of gray and an intermittent flashing as the sun caught polished metal. *A parade?* he wondered. Was it possible the king was having a celebratory parade? Or maybe it was an official escort.

Some of the Marutians also heard the sound and pointed in that direction.

“Soldiers!” Wayne exclaimed.

Fendar and Wondrar had taken notice now.

Snakelike, a formation of soldiers rounded a corner and headed for the gate. Some stationed themselves directly in front of the gate, while others continued straight past and took up positions along the outside of the wall surrounding the Marutian district. The Marutians grew silent.

The officer in charge came forward. “You are Fendar?” he asked Fendar.

“You know I am, Colonel Lanse,” Fendar said to the man.

They obviously knew each other from Fendar’s past life, which embarrassed the officer. He blushed and continued, “By order of the king, I am putting a stop to this illegal assembly and arresting you for treason.”

Fendar laughed. “You’re joking,” he said dismissively.

“I’m afraid not. You are to come with me.” The colonel stepped forward to take Fendar’s arm.

Jakin suddenly broke through the crowd with a knife in hand. “Let him go, you treacherous—” he shouted.

Fendar grabbed Jakin’s hand as the line of soldiers lifted their muskets to shoot him. “Stop, Jakin!” Fendar ordered. “This is not the way.”

“You won’t let them take you. The king will kill you without a trial,” Jakin warned.

“Don’t worry about me. Worry about getting the Marutians safely back into their houses.”

Jakin looked puzzled.

Another sign was coming, Danny felt. It had appeared in his mind’s eye like a clear picture, only it was a picture that didn’t make sense to him. He saw all of Muirk buried in a terrible blizzard. But how could that be? It was summertime.

Fendar approached Colonel Lanse and told him, “Colonel, I suggest you return to the king and tell him that the Unseen One will not be mocked. He has had several chances now to do the right thing. Must he suffer yet another sign to demonstrate the Unseen One’s power?”

Colonel Lanse looked bored. “You can tell him yourself, Fendar,” he replied. “Come along quietly.”

“But it’s not for me to go with you. I will meet the king on the Unseen One’s terms, not his.”

“Yes, yes, now let’s go.” He reached out for Fendar.

Wondrar stepped between the two men, the walking stick held firm in front of him.

"No tricks now," Lanse said. "My men are ordered to shoot to kill."

"How can they kill what they cannot see?" Wondrar asked. He brought the bottom of the stick down onto the ground with a loud rap. The soldiers cried out, dropped their rifles, and covered their eyes.

Colonel Lanse, who was unaffected by whatever had happened, turned to his men and shouted, "What's wrong with you?"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a harsh, cold wind began to blow. It came at gale force and buffeted the soldiers, sending their rifles flying away. They stumbled out of control against the wind.

To everyone's astonishment, snow began to fall. It wasn't the gentle, Christmassy kind, but the awful, horizontal kind that sticks to everything and gathers faster than you can shovel it. In a matter of seconds, the ground was covered.

Danny now did a double take, looking at the soldiers in Muirk, then back at the Marutians who stood behind the gate to the Promised Land, and then at the soldiers again. It was still a sunny, calm day in the district. But the blizzard Danny had imagined was now hitting with full force on the other side of the gate. The soldiers scattered in all directions, as if they'd been blown like dead leaves.

Colonel Lanse didn't seem to know what to do now. No one had anticipated this in his orders. "Fendar, stop it!" he finally ordered.

"Take the message to your king," Fendar said. "All Palatia will be covered in snow and ice. I will be pleased to meet him when he wishes to talk."

Colonel Lanse closed his eyes as if wishing he were somewhere else entirely. Resigned, he turned and made his way into the blizzard.

Fendar climbed onto the wagon and shouted at the Marutians, "Remember what you see here! Remember how you are favored by the Unseen One!"

Danny looked through the gate, as if through a window, at the raging storm beyond.

As soon as Morgon woke her up to see the snow, Michelle knew what had happened. The king had changed his mind, and Fendar had called down another sign. By the time she'd dressed and gone to the king's council chambers, the snow was several feet deep, with drifts even higher. The servants couldn't get the front doors of the palace open at all.

Michelle had no idea how the king had managed to get his advisers assembled, but they were all together in the council chambers with the king and Nemathes.

Nemathes, looking more strained and anxious than ever, was speaking as Michelle slipped in through the door. "You must relent," he was saying. "While your power as an earthly king is unquestioned and greater than any in the world, you are battling supernatural forces."

"Has my chief adviser become a coward?" the king asked.

"My courage is not the question here, Sire," Nemathes replied, stung but adamantly diplomatic. "I am your chief adviser in order to bring wisdom and understanding to this council. I would be disloyal not to speak the truth."

"What do the rest of you say?" the king demanded.

Penwyth, the older gentleman Michelle had seen in another council meeting, cleared his throat and said, "This freak snowstorm will cripple the nation. No one can travel in it. Our army is immobilized. Our trade routes are cut off. When you consider the effects of Fendar's other tricks on our money and our food supplies, we will be in dire straits in no time at all."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Only what I have always suggested: Find a way to compromise with the fiend."

"How?"

"Tell him that only the Marutian *men* may go to worship the Unseen One. With their women and children stuck here, they'll have to stay on their best behavior."

"And if he refuses?"

All the advisers averted their gazes from the king.

"I see. If he refuses, you'll expect me to give in to Fendar completely."

“You had the opportunity last night,” Nemathes reminded him.

Stefan glared at his chief counselor. “I had very good reasons for changing my mind.”

Michelle knew what those reasons were, and she wondered if anyone else in the room would agree that they were good.

“All right,” the king finally agreed. “I will send a messenger to tell Fendar I’ll meet with him. But I’ll wait until he arrives before I present any details. And I’ll only meet with him if he gets rid of the snow first.”

“He’ll have to get rid of the snow if he hopes to come to the palace,” Penwyth joked.

The advisers agreed that this was a good way to proceed, and the king called for a messenger to go to the Marutian district.



It took the poor messenger a long time to travel across the city to the Marutian district. The wind and snow gave even the strongest of horses a nearly impossible task. The morning became afternoon, and then, to everyone’s surprise, the wind died down and the snow stopped falling. Soon the summer sun broke through the clouds.

“I assume he finally got the message,” the king said as he watched from one of the reception hall windows. When he was sure the snow was truly melting, he called for Colonel Lanse to come see him. Nemathes and Michelle exchanged uneasy looks. Why did he want the colonel? Did the king have another plan he wasn’t sharing with them?

The king spoke softly to the colonel so that no one else could hear what he was saying. The colonel saluted, said, “Yes, Your Highness,” and left.

“Your Highness?” Nemathes asked.

The king waved him away. “I’m simply taking a precaution,” he said dismissively.

Fendar, Wondrar, Danny, and Wayne arrived much later that afternoon. They stood before King Stefan in the reception

hall. Michelle, Nemathes, and the other advisers stood nearby to witness the encounter.

Fendar said, “In good faith, the Unseen One has brought back the sun. Will you now let us go?”

The king, who sat on his throne, responded quickly, “Tell me first whom you plan to take along with you.”

“All the Marutians, of course,” Fendar replied, puzzled.

“Ah,” Stefan said, as if this were a revelation to him, “I didn’t realize you had hoped to take everyone with you.”

“What trick is this?” Wondrar fumed.

“I have assumed all along that you wanted to take the Marutian *men* only,” the king said innocently.

“We are taking *everyone*, Sire,” Fendar insisted.

The king shook his head sadly. “I’m afraid that you can’t. You may take the men, but you must leave the women and children behind.”

Fendar stood his ground. “*All* of us must go, Sire.”

The king spread his hands helplessly. “But if all of you go, how will I know you’ll come back?”

“You have my word as a voice of the Unseen One.”

“You swear upon something that means nothing to me!” Stefan snapped. “It’s not good enough.”

“Then by your own word do you bring judgment against your nation,” warned Fendar.

“And you bring suffering to your own,” the king retorted. “Even while we speak, my soldiers are descending upon the Marutians. I will fill my dungeons and prisons with as many of you as I can!”

The assembled crowd gasped with surprise. *So that’s why the king wanted to speak with Colonel Lanse*, Michelle thought. She glanced over at Danny and Wayne. They looked shocked. Danny caught her eye and shook his head. She’d never seen him look so sad. She wondered if he felt sad because the king had double-crossed them again, or for some other reason. What would Fendar do now?

She suddenly felt sick in the pit of her stomach. They were no longer dealing with disappearing money, rotten clothing, or skin problems. The thought of people jammed into dungeons wasn’t what she had in mind. This wasn’t merely a contest of wills anymore. She wished it would stop. This was getting far too serious.

“Do you think I’m a fool?” the king shouted at Fendar.

“I know what you’re doing. You want to take your people out of Muirk for a few days so they’ll realize what freedom is like. Once you’ve done that, there’ll be no living with them. I’ll be dealing with every rebel and revolutionary in your district.”

Fendar was unperturbed. His voice, low and commanding, rattled the windows. “Save yourself—and your people—by allowing the Marutians to return to their land *now*.”

“Never!”

“So be it,” Fendar said, sounding to Michelle like the voice of doom.

Danny suddenly spoke up. “Long ago, Marus was called to be a light to the nations,” he began. “Its light will expose everything for what it truly is.”

Before Michelle realized what was happening, Wondrar lifted and threw the walking stick down. It stabbed into the floor like a spear, shattering the marble and tiles. He let go of it, and it stood upright and still. The crowd stepped back, fearful of what it might do.

The handle of the walking stick began to glow a dull red, a pinkish color, and then white. The whiteness of the light grew and then fanned out sheetlike to the rest of the room. It got brighter and brighter until the natural shadows of the room grew long and then snapped like rubber bands into oblivion.

“What are you doing?” King Stefan called out as he tried unsuccessfully to protect his eyes. The light seemed to penetrate through his hands.

“A plague of light,” Fendar said, then motioned for Wondrar and the two boys to follow him. To everyone’s amazement, they left the walking stick in the floor of the reception room. The king drew a sword from a sheath that had hung on the wall and raced to strike down the walking stick. No matter how many times he struck, however, the stick didn’t move, nor was it even scratched by the blade.

Michelle turned her head against the wall and tried to block out the light, but it was impossible. The light was relentless. It penetrated and illuminated everything. She couldn’t even close her eyes and hope for darkness.

I thought I was immune, she thought. But this time she wasn’t. The light tore into her. She wondered how long someone could endure such a light before going mad.



The light in the Promised Land was as normal as it could be. The sun faded into the evening, and then night came. Muirk, on the other hand, glowed so brightly that even when all the curtains were drawn, extra blankets were added to the windows, and pillows were piled on their heads, people still couldn't sleep. Occasionally, a Palatian came to the gates and screamed at the Marutians in wild profanities. Other Palatians simply screamed from the pain caused by the light.

Danny lay awake for the longest time, wondering how Michelle was coping. Was she able to escape the endless light? Her expression, when Wondrar had jammed the walking stick into the floor, made Danny think she hadn't escaped it. She must have been suffering whatever the rest of the Palatians suffered. He found himself praying that Michelle would be all right.

Back at Muirkostle, Michelle prayed the exact same thing for herself. Whether her eyes were open or closed, it didn't matter—the light came through. If she put her head under a pillow, crawled under the bed, or hid in the wardrobe, the light still came through. She imagined the deepest, darkest cellar in Palatia was ablaze with this light.

No one in the palace could sleep any better than the rest of the Muirkians. Michelle suspected that no one in all of Palatia could sleep, either. The light went on.

The next day, the king brought in all his advisers, military personnel, and magicians to try to destroy the walking stick and stop the light. But no amount of pulling with ropes or attacks with swords or axes affected the stick. It stood in the ground as if it had always been there and always would be.

On the second day, the king showed no signs of

relenting to Fendar. Michelle, her head aching from the light and lack of sleep, spent the day doing nothing. She wandered around the palace like a small ghost. She eventually went to the king's chambers to make sure Chardan and the children were all right.

Chardan came to the door, looking pale and exhausted, and frowned at Michelle. "My children have been crying all night," she reported, as if it were Michelle's fault.

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?" Michelle asked.

"You can go back to wherever you came from," Chardan told her in a cold voice.

The statement stung Michelle. "What do you mean?"

"I had hoped that by allowing you to be a part of our family, you might persuade Fendar to give up. But you haven't. You haven't done a thing since you arrived here. My husband thinks you're something special, but as far as I can see, you are part of our troubles. So why don't you go away?" Chardan then slammed the door in Michelle's face.

For the rest of that day and into the night, Michelle wept as she had never wept before. In that endless light, the tears seemed to sparkle like jewels as they fell.

I've been rejected again, she thought. *No matter where I go or what I try to do, I'm not accepted. No family will have me—not my own, not the king's, not even Danny and Wayne's.* In the deepest part of her pity, she wondered if she would ever find a place to belong, a home for herself.

When she thought she could cry no more, she lay in bed and stared at the insides of her bright eyelids until she lost track of time.

The third day came with the sound of a commotion on the palace lawns. People were gathering, many as protesters. They shouted their demand for the king to put an end to their troubles. They had suffered enough, they said. Michelle watched as Stefan's guards went out to disperse the crowd. But the guards were outnumbered and ultimately had to retreat into the palace. Morgon arrived and said there was going to be a gathering in the king's council chambers.

Still exhausted, Michelle got up, dressed, and went to the meeting. Stefan's advisers had already arrived. They whispered among themselves, wondering what the king would do. Nemathes entered, looking frightful and sick. Michelle had no doubt that he had spent all this time trying to overcome

the powers of the Unseen One. But there was no overcoming *this*, Michelle knew.

After nearly an hour of waiting, the king finally came in. He looked like a mess. His hair was disheveled, and his eyes were wild. Something about his demeanor made him seem more unpredictable than ever. Nemathes looked concerned. The advisers also exchanged worried glances. Michelle was hesitant to think it, but to her the king looked insane. Surely the endless light hadn't done that to him in only three days!

"I've summoned Fendar," Stefan said.

"What will you do, Sire?" Nemathes asked.

"Get him to turn off that blasted light, for a start."

Penwyth asked, "Will you allow the Marutians to go?"

King Stefan held up a finger. "You'll have to wait and see," he said.

Michelle wasn't comforted.

They adjourned to the reception hall as Fendar, Wondrar, Danny, and Wayne came in. Michelle thought the four of them looked healthier and stronger than ever. She imagined that the Marutian district was saved from the terrible light somehow.

King Stefan, positioned on his throne once more, waved at the walking stick. "We can't talk with that thing beaming at us," he said.

Wondrar went up to the stick and pulled it out of the floor. To everyone's relief, the light slowly faded. Michelle rubbed her eyes. Her headache began to fade. From outside, they could hear the people on the palace lawn applaud.

After a few minutes, when the light had returned to normal, the king said calmly to Fendar, "I've given due consideration to your request."

"And?" Fendar prompted.

"And I've decided that I will allow your people to go worship your god."

"*All* my people?"

"Yes."

Wondrar looked relieved. Wayne nudged Danny happily. But Danny didn't believe it was going to be so easy, and he could tell from Fendar's expression that he didn't believe it either. Michelle was astounded.

Fendar said cautiously, "With all due respect, Sire, are

there any conditions on your permission?"

"Conditions?" the king asked with that feigned innocent tone in his voice.

"We have come to this point too many times before," Fendar said candidly. "Are you saying that all Marutians are free to go out of the city to worship?"

"Yes. But—"

Danny braced himself.

The king continued, "I don't want you to take anything with you. Only the clothes on your backs and enough food for three days. You must leave all your possessions and valuables. That doesn't sound unreasonable, does it?"

Fendar scratched at his chin thoughtfully and then said, "I'm sorry, but that won't do."

"What do you mean?" the king asked impatiently. "I'm letting you go!"

"The Unseen One hasn't instructed me specifically about what our worship will be like. We may need some of our possessions with us."

"Which ones?"

"I won't know until we get there."

King Stefan could hardly contain his fury. "You expect me to allow you to leave with all your men, women, children, *and* possessions—and I'm supposed to believe you'll come back?"

"If I say we will come back, we will."

"How do I know that?"

"You will have to trust me, as I trust the Unseen One."

Stefan slammed his fists down on the armrests of his throne. "No!" he screamed. "I won't do it! I've conceded enough to you!"

Nemathes moved toward the throne, obviously to appeal to the king. Stefan pushed Nemathes away as he leaped to his feet and crossed the floor until he was only a foot from Fendar. He looked as if he might rain blows upon his former brother, but he kept his hands at his sides. He thrust his face toward Fendar and hissed, "Get out! Get out of my sight! You and your god can do what you will, but I swear to you, if I ever see your face again, you'll die!"

Fendar didn't move or flinch. He listened to the king with an unsettling serenity. When the king had clearly finished, Fendar replied, "It is true. I will never appear before

you again."

He turned away from King Stefan and walked out of the reception hall. Still clasping the walking stick, Wondrar followed his brother. Wayne, clearly disappointed, shrugged and left. Danny remained, his gaze fixed on Michelle. He wanted her to come along. He *willed* her to.

"Oh no," the king said in a half whisper to Danny. "She stays here with me. Maybe you should stay too." He grabbed Danny's arm in a vicelike grip. Danny squirmed, but it was no use.

Suddenly Wondrar appeared in the doorway again. He stared at the king.

Stefan studied Wondrar, his eyes going from the man to the walking stick and back again. Then the king let go of Danny and stepped away. "It's no good without three children," he said as if he might burst out laughing. "You need three, and you've only got two."

Danny staggered back from the king and toward the door, rubbing his arm where the king had grabbed him. Wondrar put a hand on his shoulder and silently guided him out.

The king swung around to Nemathes, but he pointed to Michelle. "Make sure she's safely guarded," he ordered. "I don't want her to be tempted to join her friends."

"Sire!" Michelle cried out in protest.

He held his hand up. "Not a word, my dear. It's for the best. You'll see."

Nemathes asked, "But Sire, what happens now?"

"I intend to play this game to the death," the king replied resolutely.

The assembled council seemed to freeze at his words.

The king briskly rubbed his hands together. "I have been too lenient and understanding. It is a weakness of mine."

"What are you going to do?" Nemathes asked fearfully.

"I want every available soldier throughout the land to come to Muirk," said the king. "I will assemble a force so great and so powerful that the Marutians and their god will tremble to see it. Then I will burn the Marutian district to the ground. Let them live as slaves ought to live and see how they like it. They'll *beg* to be restored to my favor!"

"But Fendar's powers—"

"I don't care about his powers! The might of my army

will strike so hard and so fast that he won't have time to conjure up any spells. Their onslaught will be final. By this time tomorrow, I will have control of my nation again!" The king swept out of the room like a wild whirlwind, taking his advisers with him.



Danny sat in the corner of the Marutian assembly room with Wayne, his heart in the grip of despair. In the moment when the king had grabbed his arm, he suddenly imagined what was going to happen next. In his mind, he saw terrible images of death and grief.

Meanwhile, around him, Fendar and Wondrar were listening to the complaints of Regmund and the rest of the Marutian elders. "The king will destroy us!" Regmund despaired.

"You've ruined everything!" another elder declared. "You took a good situation and turned it into a catastrophe!"

"Is your faith in the Unseen One so fragile?" Fendar asked them. "Haven't you seen enough of His power and glory to see that He will do what He says?"

"But *when?"* Regmund asked. "How many more signs must you throw at the king before he'll change his mind?"

Fendar shook his head in disappointment. "Don't you understand?" he asked, as if explaining something obvious to children. "The king wasn't supposed to change his mind until now."

"What?" the elders roared.

"The Unseen One wanted to demonstrate His power not only to the Palatians but also to *you*. These signs were as much for *your* benefit as for the Palatians'. The Unseen One wanted you to see that He alone could safely lead you home again."

One of the elders stood up. "But the king will not see you again," he argued. "He said he'd kill you. What will the Unseen One do now?"

Fendar looked at the elders sadly. "He will now do the most difficult and painful thing that can be done. My brothers,

prepare yourselves for the darkest of all nights.”



The king was still in a defiant mood when the letter from Fendar arrived at the palace. He opened it and intended to read it in a mocking voice to his council. But the first words stopped him, and his tone became soft and extremely serious. The letter said,

> At midnight *tonight,* Death itself will pass through Palatia. *All the firstborn sons*—the heirs of Palatia's future—will be taken. From the oldest son of the king to the oldest son of the lowliest slave, no one will be spared. The cry of the Palatians will rise up like no cry *that has ever been heard before* or will be heard again. Then you *will* know that the Unseen One is the one true God over and above all. And *then* you will ask the Marutians to leave your country—not fo*r one day or two, but forever.*

The faces of the council members went pale. Their mouths hung open and their heads hung low.

Nemathes stared at the king. "You must let the Marutians go *now*," he said.

King Stefan forced a disbelieving chuckle as he crumpled the letter. "This will not happen," he said confidently. "No one has this kind of power to pick and choose the victims of death. Not even Fendar." He turned to one of his generals. "When will our army be ready to invade the Marutian district?"

"First thing tomorrow," the general replied.

"If they want to see power, they'll see it then!" the king declared in a voice of bravado. The room replied with silence.

Michelle was locked in her room, and it wasn't until Morgon brought her lunch that she heard about Fendar's letter. "Everyone in the palace is talking about it," Morgon reported.

Michelle sat on the edge of her bed. She couldn't imagine that such a thing could possibly happen.

"You will not see me for the rest of the day," Morgon said as she put the tray of food on the end table. "I have a son. I am taking him away from Muirk until this has passed over."

Later that afternoon, Nemathes came to Michelle's room. "Come with me," he instructed.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"We're going to find a way to stop Fendar.



In spite of the protests of the elders, Fendar persuaded the Marutians to pack their necessities into every available wagon and cart. "The king *will* allow us to leave," he assured them, "but we must go *immediately*. Bring only what you will need, not everything you want."

Most of the people were still in a state of disbelief. They had had so many close calls about leaving that they were doubtful about this one. But Fendar assured them repeatedly that the events to come would cause the king to relent.

That evening, Fendar gathered with Danny, Wayne, and all of Wondrar's family around the dining room table. In front of him was the chalice he'd brought from Gotthard, the one with the lamb's blood in it.

"This is our new beginning," Fendar announced as he put his hands on the chalice. "It is our Deliverance Day. Remember it well. Tell it to all the children of Marus in every generation to come." He took the cover off the chalice and dipped his thumb into the lamb's blood. Then he reached over to Maykar, Wondrar's oldest son, and rubbed the blood on his forehead. Up and down and side to side, he drew a t-shape. "All the firstborn who are sealed with this sign will not see

Death tonight. And in years to come, it will become the seal of a promise, of Death's defeat for all who believe in the Unseen One."

After that, Wondrar went out into the Promised Land and called for all the firstborn children to come to his doorstep. When they arrived, Fendar and Wondrar dipped their thumbs into the chalice and gave the sign of the *t* to them all. Danny watched in wonder, because no matter how much blood the two men used from the chalice, it never ran out.

As the last of the children went past, Wayne suddenly nudged Danny. "Hey, you're the oldest," he said.

"So?"

"So you'd better get the sign, or you might . . . you know."

Danny felt foolish. "I hadn't thought of that," he admitted. He went to Fendar and knelt down as the other firstborns had.

Fendar looked down at him. "You don't need this," he told Danny with a smile.

"I don't? Why not?" Danny asked.

"You already have the mark."

Surprised, Danny reached up to touch his forehead. "I do? But how? You haven't touched me with the blood yet."

Fendar shook his head. "It's not a mark on your forehead. You're somehow covered in the lamb's blood. The Unseen One must have sealed you in your world." Without further comment, Fendar turned away and went back inside Wondrar's house. Danny looked at Wayne.

Wayne shrugged. "What does it mean?" he asked.

"He must mean the mark of being a Christian," Danny suggested. "Didn't we learn something about that in Sunday school? It's because Jesus died on the cross."

Wayne nodded. "That must be it."

A moment later, Fendar returned to the doorstep with Wondrar and the walking stick. It was getting late. Danny knew that midnight was coming, and though he knew he was safe—knew it in the very core of his heart, far more than the scared-looking firstborn sons of Marus knew it—he dreaded what was about to happen.

In the center of the Promised Land was a large shopping square where merchants and tradesmen normally set up

wagons of goods for sale. It was empty now. Fendar, Wondrar, and the two boys walked to the middle of the square.

"People of Marus!" Fendar called out. "Come now and pray to the Unseen One." His voice seemed to echo down every street and alleyway in the district. Slowly, the Marutians left their homes and crowded into the square. Wondrar found a wooden box for Fendar to stand on. He raised the walking stick and said, "Remember this night forever. When we arrive in Marus, as the Unseen One has promised, remember and celebrate this night. For you have been chosen by the Unseen One. You have been spared. Now bow your heads, one and all, and give thanks to our Deliverer."

The heads of the people bowed low. Fendar signaled Wondrar, Danny, and Wayne to come with him. They followed him away from the square and down the main street to the gate leading to Muirk. Somewhere in the distance, a clock began to strike for midnight.

"I hope this isn't my sign," Wayne whispered to Danny.

Danny agreed, his heart racing as they stopped at the gate and looked out on the quiet city. He felt a burning in his eyes and turned away from the others so as not to be seen crying.

Fendar put a hand on his shoulder. "We do well to weep," he said sadly. "There is no joy in what the Unseen One does now." Danny looked up at Fendar and saw that his eyes were filled with tears too. So were Wondrar's. Even Wayne sniffed and lowered his head.

Wondrar took the walking stick and held it up to the city of Muirk. He didn't speak but slowly brought the stick down and touched it lightly to the ground.

Danny might have imagined it, but he thought he saw a small, inklike shadow trickle from the bottom of the stick and away into the city, growing and widening like a river. By the time the clock had chimed the 12th note, Muirk seemed covered in darkness. Then the loud weeping and wailing began.



Michelle sat wearily watching Nemathes as he worked at his table in the dungeon. Throughout the evening, he had tried spells, incantations, elixirs, and potions, but he felt no confidence that any of them could protect the king's firstborn son. Then, just before midnight, he was overcome with despair and suddenly brushed his arms across the top of the table, pushing everything with a loud crash to the stony ground.

"The king will come, and I'll have nothing for him!" Nemathes cried out. "What use am I?" Then he grabbed Michelle. "Do something!" he shouted at her. "You're from that world. You're supposed to be one of the signs. You must know how to protect us!"

Upset by Nemathes's outburst, Michelle cried, "I don't know what to do!"

The small gold clock Nemathes kept on top of a wooden cabinet chimed for midnight. Nemathes looked at it wild-eyed and then struck it to the ground. He gazed at the shattered clock. "Oh, our foolish king!" he lamented. "If only he'd given Fendar what he wanted back in the beginning! If only he hadn't set his heart so stubbornly against the Marutian god!"

Nemathes spun toward Michelle again. She flinched as if he might strike out at her, too. Instead he went to a bookcase on the opposite wall behind her and poked and jabbed at the spines of the books there. "I have a collection of the Marutian legends," he said desperately. "Somewhere I'll find the meaning of this. I may not be able to stop what happens tonight, but I may be able to stop tomorrow. What does the legend say about the signs?"

While Nemathes pored over his books, Michelle quietly stood up and walked to the door. She wanted to go back to her room, get into her regular clothes, and go away. She was no use to Nemathes. She was no good to the king. Why was she brought here at all?

Nemathes didn't seem to notice as she slipped out the door and climbed the cold, dark staircase back to the main level of the palace. She opened the door at the top and stepped into the hallway. Somewhere in the building, a woman wailed in a high, almost ghoulish cry. Michelle's skin crawled as she walked quickly toward her room. But she couldn't walk quickly enough. More shouts and cries came, echoing down the halls from all directions. A door slammed

behind her, and a sobbing man staggered past, his arms carrying a small bundle. Michelle pressed herself against the wall, too fearful to move. Nearby was an open window, and from the black expanse of the city came a chorus of lamentation. Michelle covered her ears and now ran and ran until she was buried under the pillows of her bed, but there was no escaping the grief.

Death had come, and Palatia would never be the same again.



The king summoned everyone in the palace to the reception room the next morning. Michelle, dressed in her normal clothes, squeezed herself into the crowded room. The king had not bothered to put on his royal robes but stood before them in a plain, white shirt and dark trousers. His face was unshaven, and his eyes were red-rimmed.

"Prince Penthan is dead," the king said simply.

Michelle felt a sob catch in her throat. She looked around for Nemathes, but he wasn't there.

"I know many others died last night," the king continued. "The god of Marus is a great and powerful god. He has crushed me under his heel." He lowered his head as if he couldn't say any more, but then he forced himself on. "I no longer care what becomes of the Marutians. Let them go. Let them take their god and leave us forever. I want no more to do with them."

So this is the end, Michelle thought. She wondered if she were now free to leave the palace. There was no point in staying any longer, she reasoned. If she could find Danny and Wayne, maybe they could all go back to their world together.

The king dismissed the assembly, and Michelle wanted to say good-bye, but the king had gone. It was probably just as well, she figured. If the king felt toward her as Chardan did, he wouldn't want to speak to her again anyway. She decided to go right then. Making her way to the front of the palace, she had just reached the ornate double doors when a voice called from behind her, "Stop!" It was Nemathes.

Michelle obeyed.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked when he had caught up to her. He had the same wild-eyed look as he'd had before.

"I thought I would leave now," she explained.

He looked at her with a cruel expression. "Leave? Oh, but you can't. Not now."

"Then when?" she asked.

"You can't *ever* go," he declared. He grabbed her arm and dragged her back down the hall.

The Marutians gathered themselves into a long caravan of wagons, carts, and those on foot and waited by the gate for Fendar's signal. There was no doubt now that they would leave without interference. All of Jakin's spies had confirmed the king's words at the palace. Then, an hour later, a royal messenger had arrived with a message from the king. It was addressed to Regmund, not Fendar or Wondrar. The note said simply, "Go."

Regmund stood on a wagon and read it to all who could hear him. He then waved the letter, and a cry of celebration went up like the roar of a thousand lions. It was so loud that Danny and Wayne had to cover their ears.

Fendar was less jubilant. "We will celebrate when we reach Marus," he said. "We must leave Palatia now, while we can."

"The king isn't going to change his mind again, is he?" Wayne asked.

Fendar answered, "I won't predict what the king will or will not do. But we must seize the moment and leave."

"But what about Michelle?" Danny asked.

Fendar shook his head. "She is not coming with us."

Danny objected, "We can't leave her behind!"

"She is in the hands of the Unseen One."

Danny exchanged worried glances with Wayne, but they sat back on the wagon and hoped for the best.

Fendar nodded to Wondrar, who then gave a signal to

the drivers of the first wagons to go. Slowly and clumsily, the caravan moved forward and through the gate. Many looked back upon the Promised Land with sadness. Others looked resolutely ahead. They followed a road that skirted the long way around the center of Muirk. Fendar had worried that the Palatians might attack or abuse them if they appeared to parade victoriously past them.

Even on the circuitous road, many Palatians came out to see the Marutians leave. Instead of abuse, the Palatians they met gave them provisions of food and fine blankets to take with them. Danny heard one old Palatian woman say, as she handed over bread and bottles of drink, “Go—before you kill us all!”

The entire population of Marutians escaped Muirk without incident. When they reached the outskirts, Fendar announced a change of plan. He gave the command for them to follow the road to the west, toward Gotthard, rather than the one north, which would take them directly to Marus. This started a debate with Regmund and Jakin, who thought the trade route due north would be the fastest and easiest way to go.

Fendar beckoned the men to silence and explained, “It may seem like the fastest and easiest route, but it keeps us on Palatian ground for more miles than might be safe. If we go toward Gotthard, we will cross the border sooner and be safely away from King Stefan.” He then added, “Besides, the Unseen One has commanded that we go northwest.”

Regmund looked at a map and suddenly poked a finger at one point. “Has the Unseen One also commanded that we cross the Great Canyon?” he asked sarcastically. “Your route will bring us to a dead end there.”

Fendar snatched the map away from Regmund. “We are not following your maps!” he growled. “We are following by obedience!”

The caravan moved forward again. Danny watched the landscape as it slowly went past. His mind wasn’t on the scenery, however. He was worried about Michelle.



Nemathes dragged Michelle back to her room and locked her in. Though she had pleaded for him to tell her why he was so angry, he wouldn't answer. She now sat in her room and waited. Every once in a while, she went to the window and looked out at the gardens. It was a beautifully sunny day. *A good day for traveling,* she thought. And then she imagined Danny, Wayne, and the Marutians making their way out of the city.

Later that afternoon, a key jiggled in the lock of Michelle's bedroom door. She went to it quickly, hoping it was Morgon or someone else who might let her out. But it was Nemathes, who entered with a book in his hand. Then King Stefan walked in. He was clearly agitated and looked even worse than he had that morning.

"This had better be important," Stefan cautioned Nemathes. "I'm overwhelmed now."

"Your Highness will want to know what I've learned," Nemathes assured him.

The king didn't seem to pay attention. He didn't acknowledge Michelle in any way. Instead, he paced around the room, lost in his thoughts. "I rule a fickle people," he complained while he paced. "One minute they want me to stand firm against Fendar, then the next they want me to give him whatever he wants. Now that I've let the Marutians go, I have people complaining about the work that isn't being done. One nobleman dared to call me a coward for acceding to Fendar. Imagine it! After what happened to us last night, he called me a coward! He said that perhaps they should have made *Fendar* the king! Obviously the man didn't suffer any personal losses. But he will. One way or the other, I'm going to have him executed for daring to speak to me in such a way."

"Then you'll have to kill all your noblemen, Sire," Nemathes said. "They all think you've been tricked or put under a spell."

The king stomped his foot angrily. "Don't they know how hard it was for me to give in to Fendar? Don't they realize that I'd like to kill the man this very instant?"

"Sire, please," Nemathes said, trying to get the king back on track. He opened the book to a marked page. "I have spent the entire night going over the Marutian prophecy about all that has happened to us. I've concluded that possibly you

have been put under a spell or tricked, Sire."

This caught the king's attention. "What!"

"Listen, my king," Nemathes said, and read:

By the word of a child, the signs will begin.
By the word of a child, the heart will deny.
By the word of a child, the clouds will rise.

The king listened, but whatever Nemathes was getting at didn't come clear. "What does it mean?" he asked.

Michelle wasn't sure what Nemathes was talking about, either.

"Fendar's signs came by the word of a child, the boy he had with him."

"Danny?" Michelle interjected.

Nemathes frowned at her interruption and then continued, "By the word of the second child, it says the heart will deny!" Nemathes said this with great significance and then looked to the king for approval.

The king was still confused and grew more impatient. "What are you talking about?"

Nemathes groaned with frustration. "Michelle is the second child! Her purpose was to keep you from yielding to Fendar."

Michelle was speechless, astonished at this news.

The king glared at his adviser. "To keep me from yielding? But wouldn't the Marutian prophecy *want* me to let the Marutians go free? You're not making sense, Nemathes."

"But Sire, it makes perfect sense," Nemathes argued. "She has advised you repeatedly not to give in to Fendar, has she not?"

"Yes, that's been her advice."

"And as a result, Fendar's signs have become more powerful and destructive. Even up to the death of your very own son!"

The king scowled at Nemathes for mentioning something so painful.

Nemathes waved the book as if in appeal. "Don't you see? She has purposely duped you into doing exactly what Fendar wanted so he could destroy our nation with his signs!"

"That's crazy!" Michelle exclaimed.

“Is it?” Nemathes challenged her. “Then why are you here? What purpose have you played other than to advise the king to go contrary to his own better sense?”

“But I didn’t! The king agreed with me on his own!” Michelle insisted.

“Of course he did,” Nemathes said. “What else could he do when you put him under a powerful spell?”

“Spell!” Michelle cried.

“Of course, of course,” the king decided. He looked at Michelle, his eyes filled with hatred. “You speak the truth as always, Nemathes.”

“No!” Michelle pleaded.

“And I have no doubt that Fendar knew this all along,” Stefan continued. “He played me for a bigger fool than I could have imagined. Well, he won’t get away with it.”

“What are you going to do?” Michelle asked.

“Assemble my army! I am going after the Marutians! I will deal with Fendar once and for all!” The king rushed out of the room.

“What about the girl?” Nemathes called.

“Do whatever you want with her!” the king shouted back over his shoulder.

Nemathes smiled viciously at Michelle. “So I will,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “So I will.”



The Great Canyon served as part of the natural border between Palatia's west and Gotthard's southeast. It was a chasm more than a mile wide, with thrusting rock formations, a river far below, and trees that covered vast sections like a green cushion. A natural path led steeply down one side to the canyon floor below, and then it cut across the river and up the other side. While it had taken the Marutians 8 hours to reach the canyon itself, Fendar speculated that it would take 10 to 12 hours to get down to the bottom, and another 12 to 14 to get across the river and up the other side.

Fendar sent a messenger ahead not only to test the trail but also to assure the king of Gotthard that this massive group of people coming his way was not an invading army from King Stefan. The Gotthardites had always been on good terms with the Marutians. Their relationship with Palatia, though, was strained.

The people made camp, ate an early dinner, and then settled down to sleep. Danny and Wayne stayed close to Fendar, Wondrar, and his family. Danny continued to worry about Michelle. Wayne figured Michelle could talk her way out of anything and chose instead to worry that he would never get to fulfill his sign. "Once we cross the canyon, it'll be easy going," he moped. "They won't need me to do anything."

"You're such a meathead," Danny chastised him. "Don't you realize that the sign *has* to be fulfilled? It's not an optional extra."

Wayne took a little comfort from Danny's words, but it didn't stop him from complaining that he had to wait so long.

A buzz filled the camp the next morning as Danny woke up. He'd slept comfortably in the back of the wagon in a makeshift sleeping bag. He yawned and stretched and

immediately noticed that people were up and talking. Wondrar walked past. “What’s wrong?” Danny asked.

“There is a rumor going around that King Stefan and his army are on their way to attack us,” Wondrar reported.

Danny sat up. “Attack us? But he let us go!” he protested.

Wondrar shrugged and walked on. “I guess he changed his mind.”

Within an hour, the rumor had been confirmed as fact by Jakin’s scouts. King Stefan and his best cavalrymen were racing in their direction. The entire Palatian army followed behind. They were coming to retrieve the Marutians and kill Fendar.

Danny found Fendar at a campfire, discussing the situation with Regmund, Jakin, and the other elders.

“We’re pinned against the edge of a canyon!” Regmund complained. “They’ll either trap us or drive us over to our deaths! We’re doomed no matter how you look at it.”

Fendar sighed wearily. “Have faith for once!” he admonished. “We must keep calm. The Unseen One wouldn’t have brought us here to die.”

“*You* brought us here, Fendar,” another elder said accusingly. “We don’t know that this was the Unseen One’s plan.”

“*Everything* is according to His plan,” Fendar snapped at him. “You have to trust in Him.”

Wondrar tapped his brother on the shoulder. “I think you should address the people,” he suggested. “They are worrying and complaining. Some are already talking about giving themselves up to King Stefan.”

“Oh, these children!” Fendar groaned. “Tell everyone to gather around the large oak tree—there in the middle of the field—in one hour.”

By the time the people had assembled, most of the Marutians were afraid. King Stefan and his troops were coming closer by the minute. Several of Jakin’s men, who had climbed to the top of a nearby hillside, claimed to be able to see the dust from the horses’ hooves in the distance.

“People of Marus,” Fendar called out from atop a wagon that had been placed under the tree. “Listen to me! The Unseen One has us held firmly in His grip. His hand reaches out to us, to hold us as a father holds a small baby. We must

trust and obey Him."

"But what about King Stefan?" someone from the audience shouted.

"We must give up!" another said.

"Better to die in our homes in Muirk than out here in the middle of nowhere!" still another called.

"Don't be afraid," Fendar said to them. "The Unseen One will rescue us."

"How?" many of the Marutians demanded to know. "We'll never get across the canyon in time unless we learn to fly!"

"Do I have to remind you of the signs that the great voices of the past have told us about? According to their words, three children came to us to fulfill three of the signs. You yourself witnessed the signs against the Palatians, brought about by the first child. *This* child." Here he gestured to Danny. "And we know, by King Stefan's actions and how his heart was hardened against us, that the second sign has been fulfilled by the second child."

"Michelle," Danny acknowledged softly and wondered afresh if she were all right.

"But there remains a final sign, a demonstration of the power of the Unseen One by the third child." Fendar waved a hand toward Wayne, who now looked at him bug-eyed.

"Me? Are you sure?" he gulped.

Danny smiled at his brother. His moment had come, and he wasn't ready for it.

"By the word of a child, the clouds will rise," Fendar said, repeating the prophecy. He drew Wayne to his feet on the wagon and handed him the walking stick.

"What am I supposed to do?" Wayne asked nervously.

"Speak the word while you hold up the walking stick," he replied. "The Unseen One has decreed that the sign will not come unless you bring it."

"Boy, *I* never got to hold the walking stick," Danny teased.

"Be quiet," Wayne said. He asked Fendar, "Uh, what word am I supposed to say?"

Fendar smiled down at the boy. "Rise."

"Rise?"

"Lift up the walking stick and say, 'Rise.'"

With shaking hands and knocking knees, Wayne held up

the walking stick. “Rise,” he croaked.

“Say it again, louder,” Fendar instructed him.

Wayne cleared his throat and then shouted, “Rise!”

“Now,” Fendar called out, “come to the edge of the canyon!”

The massive throng followed Fendar, Wayne, Danny, and Wondrar to the cliff that overlooked the canyon. At first there didn’t seem to be anything to see.

“Maybe it didn’t work,” Wayne worried.

“Watch,” Fendar said.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the floor of the canyon seemed to fade. It looked at first like an optical illusion. The sliver of river disappeared, then the trees.

“It’s a rising mist!” someone said and pointed.

Sure enough, a mist covered the bottom of the canyon and rose up the sides, filling it as if it were being poured in like milk. Then the mist thickened and climbed upward more quickly, swirling and spinning like a storm-tossed sea.

Everyone watched with amazement as the mist rose until it was perfectly level with the edges of the canyon, where it stopped. It stretched from one side to the other like a great gray desert.

“What good is this?” Regmund asked Fendar. “It looks astonishing, but what help is it to us?”

“We will cross the canyon *on* the cloud!” Fendar announced.

The Marutians reacted with utter disbelief. “It can’t be done!” they cried.

“Better to stay here and take our chances with King Stefan!” some said.

“You’ll find out the truth of your statement soon enough, for he’ll be here before the end of the day,” Fendar reminded them.

Regmund looked into the deep gray swirl. “But how do we know it’ll hold us?” he asked.

“It is a matter of faith,” Fendar replied. “Do you believe in the Unseen One or don’t you?”

“Yes, but . . .” Regmund stepped back from the cliff.

“Who will go first?” Fendar asked.

Everyone stood away from the cliff. Then they began to argue over who should be the first to test the cloud. Fendar watched sadly as they bickered.

Wondrar joined his brother and said, “Maybe I should go first.”

“No,” Fendar said. “These poor children must take their first baby steps to freedom.”

One of Jakin’s scouts pushed through the crowd. He was covered in dust and sweat. “King Stefan is approaching!” he reported. “By my guess, he’s only a couple of hours away!”

The news moved through the crowd like an earthquake.

“It will take at least that long to get everyone across!” Regmund shouted at Fendar.

“Then I suggest everyone should quit *talking* about crossing and take your step of faith *now*.”

The crowd continued to jabber at one another, but no one moved.

“Oh, brother!” Danny said impatiently as he stepped forward. “*I’ll* go.”

Suddenly Wayne was at his side. “No. I’ll go first,” he said firmly.

Danny was surprised.

“You *always* get to go first,” Wayne explained playfully.

Danny hesitated. What if Fendar was wrong? What if the cloud wouldn’t hold him? What would he say to his parents about their youngest son falling to his death? How would Danny cope with the loss of this brother who drove him crazy—yet whom he loved as much as himself?

Wayne tugged at his arm insistently. “Besides, it’s *my* cloud. I should go.”

Danny very nearly said no. His instincts were to wrap his arms around his brother and drag him back. But before he could do or say anything else, Wayne stepped off the edge of the cliff.



Michelle sat at the bottom of the large cage that hung in Nemathes's dungeon. She had wondered before why he had a man-sized birdcage, and now she knew. It was a prison. Rusted manacles hung loose from the bars. Hugging herself in the center of the cage, she tried to keep from touching the grimy bars or the moldy straw that covered the bottom. The cage creaked and swayed any time she moved. She dared not imagine what other creatures had been locked in here, for how long, or for what purposes. The dungeon's dampness seemed to penetrate her very bones. She had been in there for hours.

"Help!" she called out. She didn't really think anyone would come, but it comforted her to hear her own voice.

What a terrible turn of events, she thought. *I lived in a palace and was a counselor to the king. Now look at me. Imprisoned in a cage in a magician's dungeon—a magician who thinks of me as some kind of spellbinding witch. How did it all go wrong?* She frowned as she thought, *I chose the wrong side, that's how. Danny and Wayne were right all along.*

Thinking of the two boys made her wonder where they were at that very moment. Would the king catch up to them, or had they already crossed the border to freedom? Maybe they had already been whisked away—back *home*.

Her eyes welled up with tears as she thought about it. She'd made all the wrong choices and done all the wrong things, and now she was paying the price. Looking at the bars of the cage, she realized she might never be free again, might never go home. The loneliness of it all overwhelmed her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She didn't know who she was talking to at first. It might have been Danny and Wayne, since she had been working so hard against them. But in her

mind, she pictured Fendar and the walking stick with the power of the Unseen One. “I’m sorry,” she said again.

The signs went through her mind, one after the other. She remembered how each one was supposed to persuade the king to change his stubborn heart. *It was* my *heart that needed to be changed,* Michelle suddenly thought. *I was as stubborn as the king. I always have been.* “I’m sorry,” she said once again, and this time she felt as if she were speaking to the Unseen One Himself.

The heavy door leading into the dungeon groaned. Nemathes pushed it open and raced in, his robes billowing as if he were flying. He muttered to himself as he looked around. Then he went to a potbellied stove off to the corner and stoked the dying fire inside. He threw a cup of some kind of powder onto the coals, and they burst instantly to white-hot life. He picked up a long, iron rod, like a poker, and placed one end of it into the coals.

“Yes, yes,” he said as he searched for something on the tabletops and in a few of the drawers in the wooden cabinets. “Ah!” he said as he plucked up a few items and took them to his laboratory table. He set a large bowl in the center and dropped the items in. Then he poured in a large container of greenish liquid from one of the beakers.

“Nemathes,” Michelle entreated him.

He busied himself with the bowl but said, “It’s all so clear to me now, the way you cast your spell.”

“But I didn’t!” Michelle insisted.

Nemathes didn’t listen. “You insinuated yourself into the king’s life, his family, his very soul.” He turned to her. “You enjoyed the power, didn’t you? You were probably one of those apprentice magicians who always dreamed of having great power. I’ve seen the type before. One whiff of it and you go mad, like a shark to the blood.”

“It’s not true!” Michelle cried. “I’m not a magician! And I never dreamed of having any power!”

“You lie!” he shouted. “It’s written all over your face! You like to be in charge. You want to control others.”

“All right, all right!” Michelle conceded. “But I know better now. Honest, I do.”

Nemathes continued talking as he worked. “Power is not a child’s toy. It carries a terrible burden of responsibility. Do you think I don’t have power? More power than the king,

let me tell you. But I restrain myself. I understand that power is not to be tinkered with or unleashed, but mastered and *used*. Years ago, I vowed my talents and services to King Akaron and to his son, King Stefan. But tell me, who is *your* master? Fendar? Did he instruct you?"

"No! I never met Fendar until he came to the palace," Michelle said. Then she begged, "You have to let me go. *Please* let me go!"

"I'm afraid you won't be going anywhere. This is your home now." Nemathes gestured to the dungeon. "You will be *my* apprentice now. My slave."

"But you can't! I'm not a slave! I'm free!"

"Freedom is an illusion, you foolish girl. Freedom is simply changing from one master to another. Fendar was your master, and now I am your master." Nemathes closed his eyes and waved his hands over the large bowl as he muttered something. Then he went to Michelle's cage and undid the padlock. He opened the door.

Michelle sat where she was. "What are you going to do to me?" she asked.

"I'm going to show you something. Don't be shy. Come along."

"Is it going to hurt?"

"*I'm* not going to hurt you, if that's what you mean. I want you to see what will become of your friends."

This piqued Michelle's interest. "Danny and Wayne?"

"Yes. I have conjured up a bowl of sight. I want you to see how the king deals with those who defy him."

Michelle climbed out of the cage and stumbled against Nemathes. Her legs had nearly gone to sleep. He steadied her and led her to the table. "We'll watch together, shall we?"

With a careful eye on Nemathes, in case he might be playing a trick, Michelle climbed up on one of the stools and looked into the large bowl. At first she didn't see anything but a greenish, murky fluid.

"The picture has gone all fuzzy," Nemathes said. He waved his hand over the bowl again.

As if watching a television that had just come on, Michelle could see a picture of hundreds of people walking. They were all going in the same direction, from a large brown patch of land onto a whitish-gray sand that looked like steam, and then across to another brown patch.

"The Marutians," Nemathes stated.

Michelle was mystified. "How can we see this?"

"Through the eyes of Excelsior, my eagle. He is flying around the site."

Michelle adjusted her glasses to make sure she wasn't imagining what she was seeing. "What are they doing?"

Nemathes looked closer and gasped, "They seem to be crossing the Great Canyon from Palatia to Gotthard! But by what dark arts? There is no bridge there, and yet they walk freely across the top!"

By no spoken command, the eagle circled in closer. "What is it?" Nemathes mumbled.

Closer now, the whitish-gray sand seemed to be swirling and spinning beneath the feet of the Marutians. Michelle still couldn't see what it was.

"It is a cloud!" Nemathes suddenly shouted. Michelle couldn't tell if he was alarmed or impressed. "They are crossing the Great Canyon on a cloud!"

"By the word of a child, the clouds will rise," Michelle remembered aloud.

The eagle then flew higher and higher and looked back in the direction from which the Marutians had come. In the far distance, men on horseback raced toward the canyon. It was the king and his cavalry.

Michelle felt a tightness in her chest. A large group of the Marutians was still moving onto the cloud from the Palatian side. She wanted to shout, to warn them.

"It's only a matter of time," Nemathes observed.

From the eagle's vantage point, they could see the king's horsemen getting closer and closer. The Marutians who'd taken up the rear also saw them and, panicked, now rushed onto the cloud. *They're not going to make it*, Michelle thought.

The edge of the cloud on the Palatian side seemed to move. First it spilled over, like bony fingers tentatively touching the land. Then it reached over fully and spread across the land toward the coming cavalry. As fast as the horses came in one direction, the cloud moved more swiftly in the other. Michelle braced herself for a terrible head-on collision between the two.

"No!" Nemathes screamed. "Beware, Sire, beware!"

By now, the king and his men saw the coming cloud

and began to slow down. The cloud didn't hit or crush them but moved through them like a normal mist. It was thick enough, though, to keep the king and his cavalry from advancing. They had no choice but to wait.

Nemathes could hardly contain his anger.

Michelle sat back, relieved that the Marutians had this chance to escape. The last of them quickly made their way across the canyon to the other side. Michelle could see Fendar and Wondrar now, standing at the edge of the cliff. Danny and Wayne were next to them. She felt a sad sense of regret. She should have been with them.

Once the last of the Marutians had their feet placed solidly on the Gotthard side, Wondrar held up the walking stick and waved it three times.

"What's this?" Nemathes hissed.

The mist around the king's horsemen suddenly lifted and faded, as if it had never been there. King Stefan commanded his men to go forward.

"No, Sire, it must be some sort of trick!" Nemathes called to the bowl. But the king obviously couldn't hear him and raced onward.

Michelle wondered what kind of trick it could be. It looked to her as if the king and his cavalry could easily reach the Marutians by crossing the cloud.

The king's horses sped to the edge of the cliff but then suddenly drew to a halt at the risen cloud. Clearly, the horses' instincts told them not to go on.

"Thank the gods for the wisdom of beasts," Nemathes said.

King Stefan turned to his men, and Michelle guessed they were arguing about whether to cross. She knew what they were saying. It still looked like a cloud, they reasoned, and yet an entire nation of people had just crossed on it. Should they go on or shouldn't they?

"Stop where you are!" Nemathes begged them. "It's no use now."

The eagle must have called or screeched, because King Stefan looked up at it. He pointed, as if he recognized the eagle.

Nemathes was delighted. "Yes, Sire, you know me. Now heed my warning. Turn back. Don't trust any of Fendar's magic!"

But the appearance of the eagle seemed to have the opposite effect on the king.

"He thinks it's a sign!" Michelle blurted out. "He thinks your eagle wants them to go on!"

The king commanded his men to spur their horses forward.

Nemathes grabbed the edge of the bowl. "Don't do it, my king! Don't!"

But the king's cavalry went on, spurring and whipping the horses until they abandoned their natural instincts and stepped out onto the cloud. Like a miracle, it held them! They could cross just as the Marutians had!

"Is it possible?" Nemathes asked, daring to hope again that his king might succeed.

On the Gotthard side, the Marutians were in a terrible state of panic. Most of them dropped their things and tore away from the canyon, running wildly across the vast plain. Fendar, Wondrar, Danny, Wayne, and only a handful of others remained on the canyon's edge.

"What kind of trick is this?" Nemathes said. "Why would Fendar allow King Stefan to cross?"

The entire cavalry was on the cloud now, dashing closer and closer to Fendar.

"Why does he stand there?" Nemathes wondered. "Why doesn't he run?"

The answer came when King Stefan, in the lead, was only a few yards away. The cloud suddenly billowed up and seemed to blow away from under the horses' hooves. King Stefan and his men sank into it, slowly at first, as if they'd been caught in quicksand.

"No!" Nemathes shrieked.

Then, as if someone had opened a trap door, the men and their horses disappeared into the thick, white cloud. A moment later, the cloud dissipated to reveal the open space of the canyon floor. There was no doubt that the king and his men lay dead somewhere below.

Nemathes's face was red with a quivering fury unlike anything Michelle had ever seen. He swung around to her, his hand lashing out. It caught her on the side of the head and sent her sprawling backward off the stool and onto the floor. Though her head buzzed, Michelle crawled away as quickly as she could.

Nemathes came toward her. “You have killed my king!” he screamed.

Michelle climbed quickly to her feet and dashed for the door. Nemathes caught her by the collar, spun her around, and threw her into the shelves of books. Something scratched at her forehead, and the wind was knocked out of her as she collapsed in a gasping heap against the wall.

“You cannot live now!” Nemathes said as he came at her. He could easily have grabbed her, but off to his right, the bowl of sight suddenly made a strange popping sound, and then a mist—like the one they had seen at the canyon—blew into the room like smoke from a chimney. In no time at all, it enveloped Nemathes until he was an obscure shadow. The table, the wooden cabinets, and the rest of the room soon faded. Then all was dead quiet.

Once Michelle got her breath back, she pulled herself up. She touched the scratch on her forehead and saw blood on her fingers. She had to make her way to the door, she knew. But would Nemathes reach out and grab her as she passed?

Through the mist, Michelle saw what looked like the red glow of a fire. Was it the potbellied stove? Hoping it would give her a sense of direction for the room—and how to reach the door—she went toward it. It crackled pleasantly. She then realized two things. First, it wasn’t the fire in the potbellied stove. This was a large, *open* fire. Before she could panic at the thought of being trapped by a fire in the dungeon, she realized the second thing: Her clothes were soaking wet.



"Now we may find our freedom," Wondrar said as he looked down into the canyon.

"Now we may go *home*," Fendar added.

Danny and Wayne, dumbfounded by everything that had happened, moved away from the edge of the Great Canyon. "Whoa!" Wayne said softly.

"Gather the people and tell them to camp here," Fendar told his brother. "We will worship and celebrate what the Unseen One has done for us."

Before he went, Wondrar embraced Danny and then Wayne. The boys were confused, but he left before they could ask why he'd done that.

Danny felt a little light-headed. Was it his imagination, or was the mist still moving around them?

"The signs are fulfilled," Fendar informed the boys. "More will come to us by other means as we make our way home, but you have done all you were called to do."

"You mean we're done?" Wayne asked.

"Yes."

"But I wanted to see Marus," Danny said.

Fendar held up his arms. "It's a long journey, one you can't take. You have journeys of your own. You must go home now."

Danny felt the sting of disappointment.

Wayne, surprisingly, sounded enthusiastic. "How will we go back?" he asked. "Do we have to go back to the fountain?"

Even as he asked the question, the mist grew thicker around them both. Fendar, who was only a few feet away, started to blur. Danny realized what was happening and reached out to touch Fendar. He wanted to shake his hand,

hug him, or do *something* to say thanks for their adventure. Fendar reached toward him as well, and their fingertips brushed quickly.

"Good-bye, and thank *you*," Fendar said, as if from a long way off.

"It's too fast!" Danny said to Wayne as the cloud surrounded them like a blanket.

Wayne suddenly sniffed and observed, "I smell smoke."

So did Danny. Then they heard the crackling of a large fire and the press of warmth on their backs. They turned to see a large bonfire several feet away.

"Where did that come from?" Danny asked.

They both moved toward the fire, their clothes and sneakers slopping wet on the ground.

Looking at each other, they pointed and burst into laughter. "You're soaked!" they said in unison.

"Strange, isn't it?" a familiar voice said. It was Michelle. She was wrapped in a blanket and stood next to the fire. At the sight of her, the mist suddenly cleared. They were at Trickle Lake again. The police had rounded up everyone who'd fallen into the lake and were letting them dry by the fire.

"There was no need for a riot," one of the officers said to a college student.

"You *scared* us, man!" the young man replied.

"Are you all right?" Danny asked Michelle.

She pulled her glasses down her nose a little and pointed to her forehead. "I think I banged it on one of the boats."

"But what happened to you? How did you get back?"

Michelle looked around self-consciously and whispered, "Let's talk about it later. I don't want anyone to think we're crazy."

Danny understood and nodded. He had a strong feeling it would be better if they *never* talked about what had happened, except among themselves.

"I have something to say now, though," Michelle said. "And I'd better say it before I change my mind."

"When do you ever change your mind?" Wayne teased.

Michelle smiled.

"We'll talk about *everything* later," Danny said, letting her off the hook for the moment. For one reason or another,

they all had apologies to make.

"You kids are free to go home," a policeman told the three of them.

Grateful they weren't going to be arrested, they headed for their bikes after Michelle gave back the officer's blanket.

"Those are two words I'll never forget," Michelle said as they climbed onto their High Flyers.

"What two words?" Danny asked.

"*Free* and *home*," she replied and pedaled away.

The boys, realizing she intended to race them back, took off after her.

PASSAGES™



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